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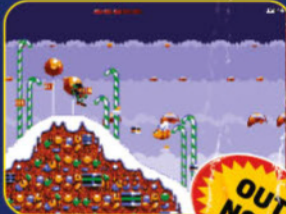
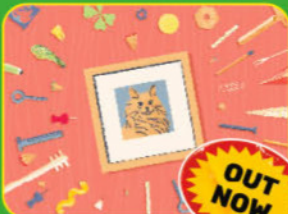
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Developers: The Chinese Room (Little Orpheus, Dear Esther, Still Wakes The Deep), Cosmonaut (Eternal Threads), Sumo Digital Academy (Zool Redimensioned), Sumo Digital (Snake Pass), Billy Goat Entertainment (Her Majesty's Spiffing, Parcel Corps), Auroch Digital (Mars Horizon 2), Animal Uprising (Wobbledogs), Hugecalf (Turbo Golf Racing), Max Inferno (A Little To The Left), Sumo Leamington (Stampede: Racing Royale), Moon Lagoon (Loddlenaut), Ice Beam (Make Way)



**PC GAMER**

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# "PARCEL CORPS PROMISES TO BE THAT FRESH GAMING EXPERIENCE"



I don't know about you, but the rather unique action-racing genre of videogames has always been close to my heart. I like the vibrancy of this genre's worlds, the counter-culture vibes that are often on display and, most of all, the varied gameplay on offer. But, as of late, fresh new games in this sector have been few and far between.

**ROBERT JONES**

Twitter

@rmicholasj

**This month**

Personally delivered every single issue of PC Gamer magazine to subscribers on a bicycle while listening to the Tall Paul remix of Camisra's Let Me Show You. 'Ave a banana!

*Parcel Corps* promises to be the fresh gaming experience this genre has been waiting for. It's *Crazy Taxi* meets *Jet Set Radio*, and I for one can't wait to slip into my Lycra shorts, jump on my bike, and get delivering.

**ROBERT JONES**

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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## The PC Gamer team

**IAN EVENDEN**

Twitter

@ieunden

**This month**

Went on a globetrotting adventure to punch Nazis in the face. The Wilhelm scream was heard often.

**WES FENLON**

Twitter

@wesleyfenlon

**This month**

Turned up the settings on his life to maximum. A low-bitrate voice then loudly boomed 'Holy Shit!'

**JODY MACGREGOR**

Twitter

@jodymacgregor

**This month**

Went into overwatch mode to bag the last PC Gamer mag in the store. Take *THAT* crying child!

**TED LITCHFIELD**

Twitter

@DORFpatrol

**This month**

Fully embraced save-scumming to eat a hotdog without getting sauce on his trousers.

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# MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



To be fair, Ash Ketchum could never grow a beard like this.

## YELLOW RAT'S REVENGE

How a DMCA'd **PALWORLD** modder got back at Nintendo

**N**intendo is a legendarily litigious company – with mods and emulation often falling under the gaze of its burning, all-seeing eye. Nexus Mods, the world's biggest mod hosting site, has even enacted a ban on *Pokémon* conversion mods for *Palworld*, citing Nintendo's record of "submitting legal challenges".

No one knows that record better than YouTuber Toasted Shoes, who received a DMCA notice after posting a teaser trailer for his *Palworld* to *Pokémon* mod that he was going to

release for free to the community. But Nintendo got there first. Before the video could accumulate even 100,000 views, the corporation swept in to take it down. But Toasted Shoes wasn't one to be stopped, and quickly assembled a team of modders to devise an infernal concoction of bootleg *Pokémon*, from Hades.

**THIS IS SOMEHOW  
MORE FLAGRANT  
THAN PIKACHU  
CARRYING A PICKAXE**

### TOO LEGIT TO QUIT

In a new video, Shoes has been playing *Palworld* using a mod that is "not a reference to anything, I promise". In it, the YouTuber plays through the adventures of "teenage boy in cap" as he roams far and wide and catches "legally distinct" creatures. This 'lovable' cast of characters includes Yellow Rat, Braided Sheep, Fire Fox and everybody's favourite: Fat Cock.

Although these little pocket-sized creatures might ring a bell or two, Toasted Shoes is emphatic: *The Legally-Distinct Pocket Creatures Mod Pack* is a "Totally Legal" mod pack that doesn't infringe on anyone's



CHILL WINDS

## THE AXE



The ink had barely dried on its Activision-Blizzard acquisition before Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer announced 1,900 layoffs. The cancellation of Blizzard's survival game *Odyssey*, alongside the departure of CEO Mike Ybarra and co-founder Allen Adham, feels ominous. ■ RS

ONE BAD DAY

## AFTER THE DAY BEFORE



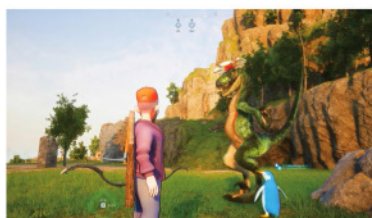
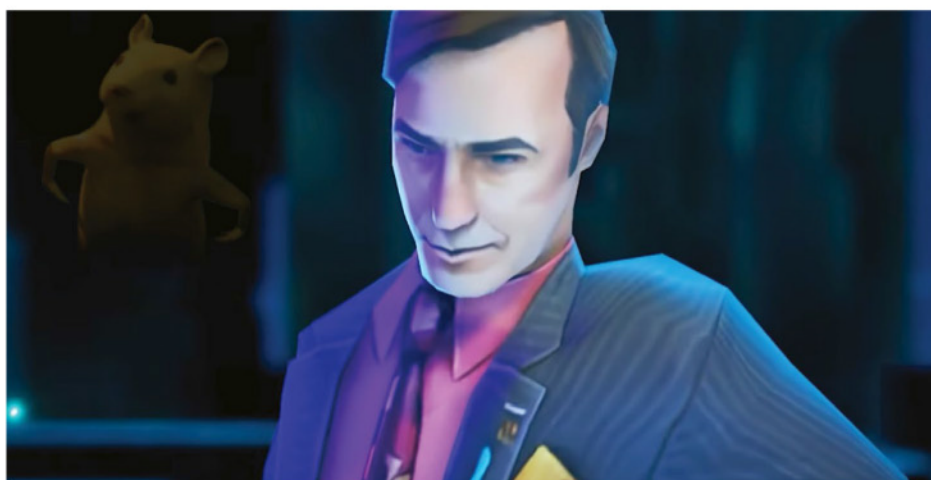
*The Day Before* was even worse than you thought. A new documentary collected dev stories of tyrannical bosses, shifting targets, endless crunch, and most bizarre of all: staff being forced to pay fines to the company if they turned in unsatisfactory work. ■ JW

DOWNSIZING

## 100MB WINDOWS



A standard Windows 11 install today can gobble more storage than the Xbox 360 launched with, but the devs behind *Tiny11* have shrunk it down to a fraction of its original size. You only need to kill off the GUI. Do you need a GUI, you ask? Uh... don't worry about it. ■ JR



**TOP:** Who you gonna call? Saul!

**ABOVE:** Keep still, Nintendo's lawyers' vision is based on movement.

copyright at all. I'm no lawyer, but I'm pretty sure all the most kosher, legit models put 'totally legal' in all caps on their descriptions. That's how you can tell them apart.

Jokes aside, this is somehow more flagrant than Pikachu carrying a pickaxe. Much more flagrant. *Palworld* has come under fire for its derivative Pal designs, which are sometimes too close for comfort – but they're at least nice to look at. They were designed by somebody, rather than strapped together with royalty-free models and set loose upon an unsuspecting public.

Teenage boy in cap's ordeals culminate in a climactic battle with Saul Goodman (yes, that Saul Goodman), who conjures a giant cease and desist letter out of a small mason jar. It's a reskin of the game's Syndicate Tower battle with Rayne, who rides an enormous Grizzbolt. That's Grizzbolt, mind you, not Electabuzz. Remember that if Nintendo's lawyers come asking questions.

There's something about seeing Saul's little head poking over the top of a menacing legal document – and by 'something', I mean it's my new sleep paralysis demon for the foreseeable future. Nintendo's copyright may be 'protected', but a terror has been unleashed into the world instead. One that's wildly, horribly aware that you have rights. The law says you do. ■

Harvey Randall

## Highs & Lows



### HIGHS

#### A gutful of Doom

MIT researchers have got *Doom* running on, wait for it, gut bacteria.

#### Survive and thrive

*Enshrouded* grabbed more than a million players in three days, making January a blockbuster month for survival games.

#### StarCraft remade

Modders have spent a decade remaking *StarCraft* in the second game's engine.

### Apology squad

*Suicide Squad* devs had to apologise after its early launch ran into bugs.

### Player known

A Korean man who avoided national service was jailed partly because his *PUBG* career cast doubt on his 'conscientious objector' status.

### What are the odds?

*Palworld* had an issue with items that increase your chances of catching pals: they seemed to be decreasing them instead.

### LOWS





# The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

**T**he Spy doesn't get the point of horror fiction. "Oh no, it's a big scary ghost, let's all run around in a panic and probably die."

Big deal. Grow up. Real horror can be achieved by simply remembering things that happened in the past. After all, Alfred Hitchcock once claimed that suspense is when the spectator knows more than the characters in the movie. And who knows less than the version of you that didn't know the events that were about to happen to them?

If The Spy ever wants to enjoy the cold sweat of terror, The Spy will just remember the time The Spy spent three days infiltrating a highly secure executive suite, carefully mapping out security patrols, drawing blueprints, and coding software to disable security systems. And after all that work, and the subsequent hours of painstaking stealth infiltration, The Spy finally realised that The Spy had got the wrong address.

Another example. Picture the scene: the streets, crowded with people singing and dancing. It's May 2022, and they've just heard that Embracer Group has announced the acquisition of Eidos Montreal and Crystal Dynamics, alongside the rights to *Deus Ex*, *Tomb Raider*, *Thief* and *Legacy of Kain*. "Finally," they think, as they embrace their neighbour for the first time since the unpleasantness over a repainted fence, "my favourite franchises have been freed from the grasp of Square Enix's baffling treatment of anything not named *Final Fantasy*".

The poor fools, they had no idea. Here, now, in the present day, the celebration is long over. In late January of this year, Eidos Montreal announced that it had laid off 97 employees – a move that, according to a Bloomberg report, coincides with the cancellation of an unannounced *Deus Ex* game; one that had been in pre-production for the last two years.

To be fair to the revellers, they had reason to be hopeful. When the acquisition was first announced, Embracer Group made a big deal about what it would mean for Square Enix's dormant series. "We see a great potential, not only in sequels, but also in remakes, remasters, spinoffs as well as transmedia projects across the group," the new owners claimed in a fiscal report. And

sure, *Tomb Raider* is getting a bundled trilogy of remasters, published by Embracer Group's Aspyr. That aside, the future doesn't seem all that bright.

## DEPRESSING TREND

Lay-offs and downsizing has been a depressing trend throughout the industry, but it seems that Embracer is struggling more than most. After a frankly bewildering number of acquisitions, and despite saying all the right things about how the group will handle its many properties, trouble started in May of last year, when a \$2 billion mystery deal collapsed at the last minute. In the wake of that collapse, we've seen studio closures and job losses.

Eidos Montreal, then, is just the latest casualty in a trend that seems set to continue, and *Deus Ex* fans are once again left wondering if the series will ever return. If only there was a dystopian game series that had warned us about the dangers of trusting giant, monolithic corporations with no regard for the people and properties they control. And also maybe aliens and the Illuminati. Spy out. ■  
*The Spy*

## IT SEEMS THAT EMBRACER IS STRUGGLING MORE THAN MOST



**THE SPY**  
The Spy remembers  
so you don't have to.





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# Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Beautiful game, shame if someone were to abuse its save system.

## A SCUM SUPREME

Developers weigh-in on save scumming

**W**e all save scummed in *Baldur's Gate III*, right? A bad roll, fight's not going well, time to mash quick load, baby. In stealth games this behaviour may manifest as a compulsion to pull the ripcord every time you get spotted, while 4Xs see us setting up a temporal base camp right before declaring a risky war. But what if living with the consequences of your actions could be fun? Usually I'd say I do enough of that in real life, but a recent dalliance with *Baldur's Gate III*'s permadeath Honour mode gave me pause.

With save scumming at the top of our minds, it was time to get to the bottom of things by asking a professional for their take. Five professionals, in fact: two RPG developers, and three who work on immersive sims, aka 'the thinking man's FPS', aka those games where you crouch walk everywhere and knock guys unconscious.

First up is Nick Pechenin, lead systems designer on none other than *Baldur's Gate III* itself. From the start, Pechenin bristles a little at the value judgement inherent in the term "save scumming," arguing that it's "making a sin out of routine player behaviour".

Pechenin further elaborates on a player-first philosophy towards the practice: it's your money and free

time, so you decide how you approach the game. While Pechenin acknowledges there's always a risk of save scumming getting out of hand, he thinks it's up to a game's developers to head it off, "The designer's job is to avoid creating a situation where a susceptible player can fall into this trap." Pechenin pointed to interesting failure states that you wouldn't necessarily want to erase as a way to keep players from getting their scum on, recalling a dynasty-ending *Crusader Kings III* succession crisis that was "so perfectly authentic [he] could not bring himself to reload and 'fix' it".

Coming from the opposite direction, Pechenin praised 'quick rewind' functions in racing games, which turn that trial-and-error of a quick load into part of the game itself instead of something abstracted through menus. That segues right into our second developer, or rather, developers: Team Fortune, the two-person team behind the Early Access FPS-immersive sim *Fortune's Run*.

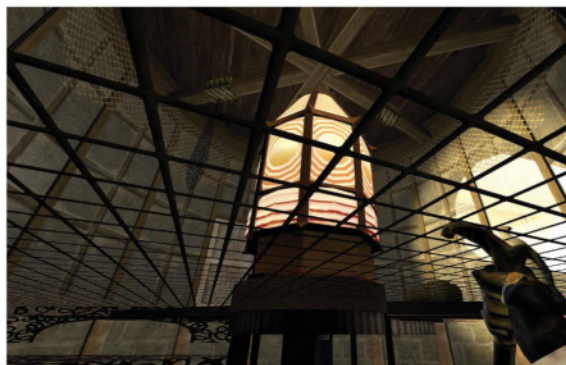
It's a fast-paced game with very few autosaves, instead leaving it to the player to decide where their checkpoints should be via quicksaves. On top of that, Team Fortune implemented a rewind animation on loading a save similar to what Pechenin describes. "We really just wanted to have some kind of cinematic or narrative framing for the transition," a Team Fortune member explains, wanting to minimise the feeling of it being "a technical feature".



### First Principles

When does it become 'save scumming' and not just saving and loading your game? Broadly, it's when you reload a save to undo a mistake that wouldn't necessarily have resulted in a game over. Our interviewees uniformly didn't find the behaviour objectionable – Team Fortune for example, merely see it as another variable to account for like player skill or genre familiarity.

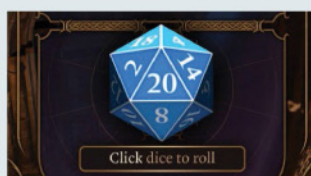




**FAR LEFT:** Hope you saved before trying that, kitty.

**LEFT:** Wish I saved before looking directly into this light.

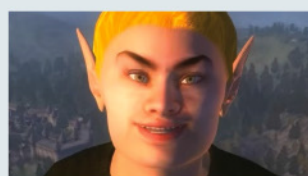
## SCUMMER'S MOTIVATION? *Common instigators of well-scummed saves*



**RANDOM NUMBER GENERATION**  
Found in *Baldur's Gate III* and *Disco Elysium*: just keep saving and loading until the dice go your way.



**SNEAKIN'**  
International super-spy cop guys like the Denton bros of *Deus Ex* fame don't get spotted – they smash F9 to load a save.



**NPC DEATH**  
A hazard of pacifist runs or when an NPC dying doesn't mean game over. Just this once, everybody lives.



**GRAND STRATEGY**  
Do I really want to put my civilisation at risk by going to war with the Greeks? I'll quicksave, just in case.

The pair believes players should do as they please with save games, arguing that “the idea of save scumming is based on the concept that there is a ‘proper’ way to experience a game,” with restrictions and rules only being truly necessary in a competitive context. Team Fortune further insist on “respecting a player’s time,” trusting them to find their fun, and giving them the tools to avoid frustrating hangups.

### MAYBE SOME SHAME

OK, not ‘shame’, but a different approach to handling save games. Dillon Rogers is currently working on *Gloomwood*, an indie immersive sim like *Fortune's Run*, but one that relies on strict checkpointing rather than infinite freedom to save. “These systems aren’t about punishment,” Rogers stresses, instead hoping to “encourage players to free themselves from needing to play perfectly, and enjoy the thrill of making – and recovering from – mistakes”.

Rogers’ initial experience with the *Thief* games seems to have been a big inspiration here. By using saving and loading to string together ‘perfect’ heists, the designer found he was getting in the way of his own fun. “One day I was like, ‘I am spending more time reloading the game instead of enjoying it,’ and just let myself make mistakes.”

With *Gloomwood*’s checkpoints, as well as some monstrous enemy designs that help break the genre’s historical pressure to maintain perfect nonlethal stealth, the game encourages players to improvise and adapt when things go wrong, instead of loading a save. Rogers

hopes this adds to the game’s stakes, “To feel the high of victory, the challenge of getting there has to feel emotionally worth investing in.”

Obsidian studio design director Josh Sawyer, meanwhile, sees it as a design failure when he’s pushed to the point of having to scum. “People have seen me do it on-stream with *Disco Elysium*,” Sawyer recalls. “I was trying to do the Conceptualization check with the mural. I had a super high investment in [the skill] and kept blowing it. I’m like, ‘Fuck this, man. I’m just gonna reload it until I get it, sorry’.”

When working on a game, Sawyer prioritises avoiding ‘standalone checks’ like this, instances of frustrating design or random number generation that encourage reloading a save until you achieve a desired result. In his own projects, Sawyer prefers static skill gates where you need, for example, 50 points in persuasion to

get past a guard, with no dice involved. If you’re short, too bad, but if your character is built that way, they can’t be punished with a bad roll.

That brings me full circle back to *BG III* developer Larian: the studio’s prior *Original Sin* games relied on such static gates, and their conversations couldn’t be brute- forced like *BG III*’s. Other priorities can supersede scum-proof design though: you can’t rightly make a D&D RPG without dice rolls. Other devs will find ways to wean off scummers, but that approach won’t fit every game, and if a new all-timer like *BG III* has design elements that incentivise me to scum, then scum I shall be. ■

**Ted Lichfield**

**“ENCOURAGE PLAYERS TO FREE THEMSELVES FROM NEEDING TO PLAY PERFECTLY”**



# Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

## MOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

**PHIL STILGOE** and **JOE ELLS** of Centroid UK on the art of motion capture

**C**entroid is a giant of the motion capture world, having worked on multiple blockbuster movies, streaming shows and globally successful games. Despite being CEO, Phil Stilgoe's route into that world wasn't quite what you might expect; once upon a time, he was working as a chef on cruise liners.

"I was interested in photography," explains Stilgoe, "so I understood cameras. We started as a family business many years ago, and it was just a bit of a passion project to begin with. And we went from strength to strength". Joe Ells meanwhile, the company's post production manager, started in the game industry, working on *Guitar Hero* – which was making use of Centroid's services at the time.

When it comes to games, the fundamental requirements for a motion capture job can vary from project to project. "Some games will require full performance capture," says Stilgoe, "and we're recording the audio, the body movements, everything. Then some games we'll have the audio tracks pre-recorded, and the actors perform to them."

As budgets and development times have increased for games over the years, so has the willingness to embrace motion capture, and to ensure that properly skilled people are involved. "They're not afraid to bring in those highly skilled people from different walks of life to fill in the gaps that used to exist," says Ells. "Now everyone's been brought up to the same level." Sometimes, experienced people from the movie industry will even be brought in to help. Movie

actors are more likely to be willing to engage in mocap than in previous years. Stilgoe credits Andy Serkis with validating this work as an option.

### PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The mocap industry itself, and the methods and equipment used, have also evolved over the years. The professional bodysuits simply didn't exist in the early days; performers would have markers attached to the body with spirit gum. They experimented with tape and elastic bands; at one point, Stilgoe's gran helped by stitching velcro onto catsuits. Eventually, however, 3x3 Designs started to provide velcro bodysuits that could have markers

quickly and easily applied. "It was like a renaissance in front of the camera for us," says Stilgoe.

Performance capture isn't just body movement – sometimes it involves detailed facial movement capture, too. This involves the actor having to perform with a boom directly in front of them, and a camera with a light; in addition to a battery pack strapped to their body. "Most actors take to that after a while," says Stilgoe, "it just might be a little bit more restrictive than they're used to. From our side, the camera needs to be aligned correctly to the face."

The complexities of capturing the movements of real people aren't always immediately apparent to a new client. "Sometimes it's their first stab at it," says Ells, "and we're happy to guide them. Ultimately, the client needs to make the final decisions, it's their property and materials. But the difference between a rig with 12 joints, [which] can't do a lot, and something with 500, potentially..."

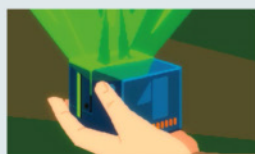
Sometimes, mocap is required for actions that aren't safe or practical to capture directly. Stilgoe gives the example of a character wading through mud. "It has to be believable. So we'll attach sandbags sometimes to the heels, or use jogging weights."

Ells is keen to emphasise that there's a wide variety of jobs to look into for anybody interested in the mocap industry. "There are so many people on the production side, there are probably 50-plus roles that people could go into, particularly on the film side of things," Stilgoe adds that they've worked with universities in order to help people be aware of these roles in the game industry. ■

**Luke Kemp**

### MOVE IT ALONG

*Other ways to skin a moving cat*



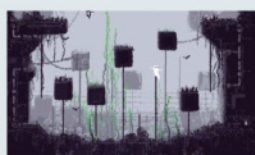
#### FLASHBACK

The fluid movement wowed people on release in 1992 thanks to its use of rotoscoping.



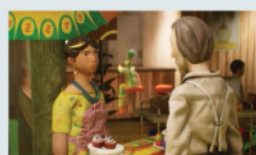
#### CUPHEAD

Painstakingly hand animated to mimic the style of American 1930s cartoons.



#### RAIN WORLD

One use of AI we can all agree isn't icky is procedural animation, as used in this indie hit.



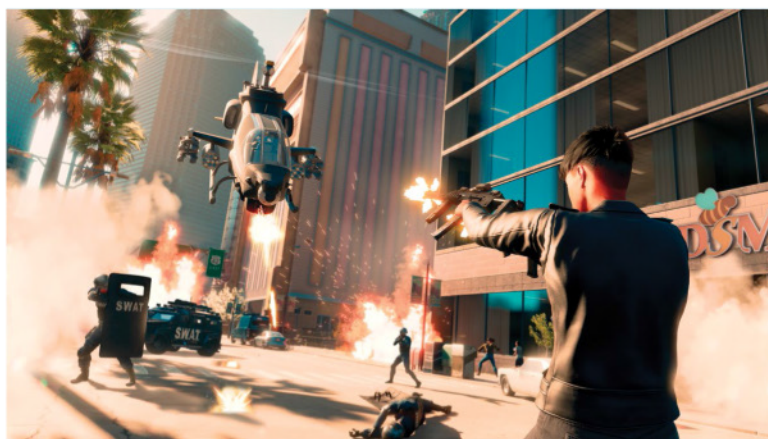
#### HAROLD HALIBUT

The game isn't stop motion animated, but looks it thanks to the use of hand-sculpted models.

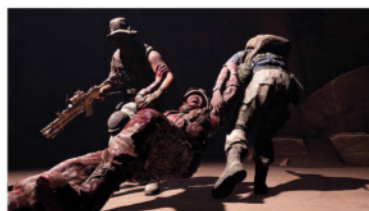




**“WE’RE RECORDING  
THE AUDIO, THE BODY  
MOVEMENTS, EVERYTHING”**



**FAR LEFT:** You can wreak havoc with the right amount of realism thanks to *Saints Row*'s mocap.



**LEFT:** *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* used mocap, but probably didn't involve real assassinations.



## 1 month



### HOMEWORLD 3

**RELEASE** May, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS. Delayed to May, a demo of its War Games mode has been delighting gamers.



### DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

**RELEASE** March 22, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

The Japanese studio's slightly mad singleplayer narrative driven action-RPG sequel promises a truly immersive fantasy world in which to adventure.



### HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

**RELEASE** March 21, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Guerrilla, Nixxes Software

The visually impressive third-person action-adventure game arrives on PC with improved graphics, ultrawide monitor support and all DLC included.

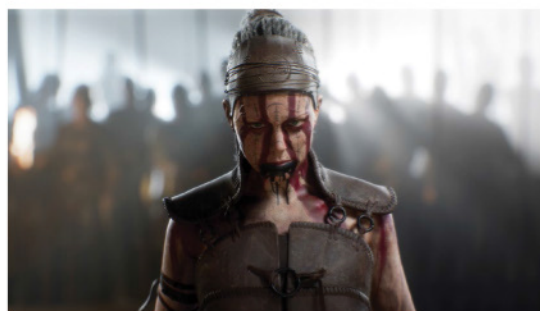
## 3 months



### STAR WARS OUTLAWS

**RELEASE** 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

What's looking like the biggest *Star Wars* game of 2024, *Outlaws* sees you play as rogue scoundrel Kay Vess in an open-world adventure set in the Outer Rim.



### SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

**RELEASE** May 21, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ninja Theory

The long-awaited sequel to the award-winning original *Hellblade*, *Senua's Saga* sees Senua return in a brutal journey of survival through Viking Iceland.



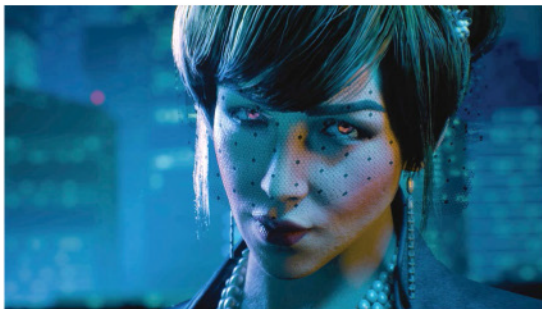
### FROSTPUNK 2

**RELEASE** 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

We were intrigued by the sequel to the hit society survival game, *Frostpunk*, when we saw it last year. Grim, difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player.



## 6 months



### VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | DEVELOPER Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises from its grave courtesy of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room.



### WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | DEVELOPER Saber Interactive

After a huge delay out of 2023 into the back-end of 2024, our hopes remain high that Titus' return against relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one.

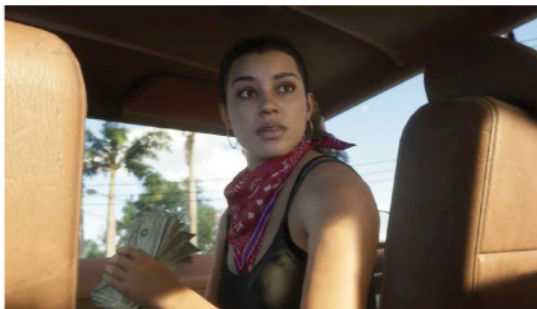


### STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | DEVELOPER GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* slipped into 2024, meaning a longer wait to return to the Zone. We were impressed with it at Gamescom, though, so keep the faith.

## 12 months+



### GTA VI

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Rockstar Studios

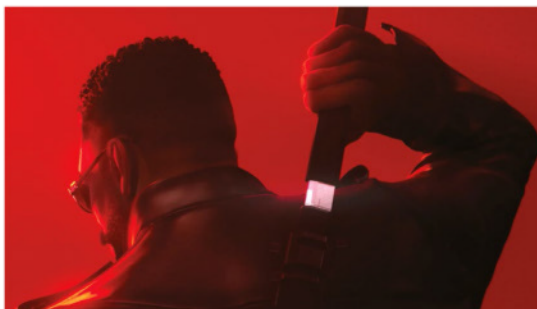
Everything we're hearing points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether that includes PC is unknown. Fingers crossed we don't have to wait too long.



### MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Capcom

The famous virtual monster hunting series returns once more in 2025, promising the "pinnacle of excellence in hunting action gameplay".



### BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, single-player, third-person adventure game.

### FRESH BG3 FACES

If you've already played through *Baldur's Gate III* multiple times and created more characters than you care to admit, then a great new mod allows you to freshen up your inevitable next character with a completely new face. *Faces of Faerun* adds a wide selection of new male and female faces to select during character creation and, best of all, it doesn't replace any stock faces, either. Grab it here: [shorturl.at/fqzFM](https://shorturl.at/fqzFM)





PREVIEW





## Indiana Jones and the Great Circle



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2024DEVELOPER  
MachineGamesPUBLISHER  
BethesdaLINK  
[indianajones.bethesda.net](http://indianajones.bethesda.net)INDIANA JONES  
AND THE  
GREAT CIRCLEA whip-cracking look at the newly  
revealed first-person adventure

**D**ial of Destiny might have proved that the cinematic franchise is as dead as Archimedes, but videogames could be the new natural home of Indiana Jones.

With no need for CGI de-aging or time travel, *Great Circle* can concentrate on what makes the series great: punching Nazis.

There's likely to be plenty of that, as the game is set in 1943, between the events of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a film in which Nazis were punched, and *Last Crusade*, a movie that also contained its fair share of fist/nose moments. That sort of thing has to be filed under 'likely' for now as we know relatively little about the game beyond the events of the single trailer available and the sparse information released by publisher Bethesda. Hot off the release of *Starfield*, Bethesda may not be everyone's favourite software house right now, but the big news is the name of the developer.

It's MachineGames, Zenimax stablemate of Bethesda and the maker of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and its associated sequels. The studio is known for its ability to build games that are grounded in their setting and come with a feeling of weight and power – just what you want if you're cracking a whip, snatching a hat from under a descending stone door, or rearranging the squashy bits of a Wehrmacht soldier's face.

FIRST  
LOOK

## ROUND AND ROUND

And then there's the title. If you've ever flown from Chile to Mongolia, you'll know that the fastest way to get there, due to the way geometry works on a sphere, is to zoom up to the Arctic, make a fairly sharpish turn, and go back down again. This feels a bit counterintuitive, as surely you could just fly there directly over the Atlantic and Africa, but greater minds than those who write game previews have decreed that this is the way to do it, and that it's called a great circle. For the mathematicians out there, a great circle is the circular intersection of a sphere and a plane passing through the sphere's centre point; any arc of a great circle is a geodesic of the sphere, so great circles in spherical geometry are natural analogues of straight lines in Euclidean space. Indiana Jones movies make much of following lines on maps, so could the new game include some form of air traffic control?

Unlikely. However, there's another great circle, and it's a bit more in keeping with the Indy mythos, which seems capable of sucking in every facet of legend from Christianity to Kali, exploring various interpretations of the word 'accuracy' along the way. If you visit the corners of the internet that feature crystals and smell of yoga, you'll find that there's a theory about ancient sites in the world lining up in a circle. A great one.

The general idea is that some sort of mysterious power caused ancient civilisations to build their temples and assorted other sacred sites in such a way that they lined up. This caused more of the mysterious power to happen, and is very much the sort of thing the Nazis should probably not get their hands on.

## CONNECT THE DOTS

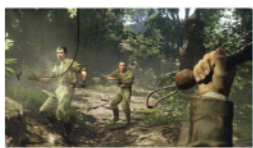
The mystery was opened up by the game's director, Jerk Gustafsson, in an interview with [lucasfilm.com](http://lucasfilm.com). "It turns out there is a very real and mysterious great circle that is not the equator, but one that connects many of history's greatest historical sites such as Giza, Easter Island, Sukhothai, Nazca and many more," he explained. "Their connection has remained a mystery, and this provides the perfect adventure for our game."

Well, yes. If there's one thing that Indy movies and games have always been

**MACHINEGAMES IS KNOWN  
FOR GAMES THAT ARE  
GROUNDED IN THEIR SETTING**



## Indiana Jones and the Great Circle



great at, it's globe-trotting adventures that would make Lara Croft and Nathan Drake look wistfully at their frequent-flyer points. Gustafsson's list takes in Egypt, the south Pacific, Thailand and Peru.

The problem is that games already have treasure hunters and raiders of tombs. Does Indy have enough – beyond the brand recognition a series of (mostly) successful movies brings – to make gamers care about his adventures?

### INSIDE INDY

Gustafsson's interview also touched on the most interesting part of the *Great Circle* reveal – it's a first-person game. "First-person gameplay is part of MachineGames' DNA, and we wanted to see how we could use this to create a really immersive experience around stepping into the shoes of the world's most famous archaeologist," he said. "It also separates our game from many other action-adventure titles, making it a unique experience that you cannot find anywhere else. However, we still want to show Indy as much as possible, so we have a seamless flow between first-person gameplay and third-person actions, events and cinematics."

This is important, because it creates a break between *Great Circle* and the somewhat mixed bag of Indy games that have come before. Apart from his adventures with *Lego* and *Fortnite*, the ones that stick in the memory are the LucasArts point-and-click games from the '90s, but there were action-adventure games too, such as *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine* from 1999 and 2009's *Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings*. The latter game missed the PC, but these indifferently received titles brought Indy into 3D and contained a certain amount of whipping and Nazi punching. They were third-person, however, so MachineGames' effort will need to provide sufficient identification with a character you can't actually see most of the time.

Embodying such a strong character makes for a slightly different kind of role-playing than you usually find in Bethesda games. Indy isn't afraid of sneaking or talking his way out of a sticky situation, but it usually ends in some sort

of cartoon violence and a fist encountering a face. Becoming Jones will need to be prioritised over the kind of customisation options we might expect.

### MR PUNCH

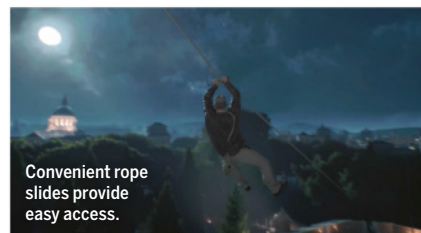
The trailer shows that keeping in character will be no problem for this iteration of Jones. According to Entertainment Weekly, Troy Baker will be providing the voice for an Indy who looks almost but not perfectly like a young Harrison Ford. The game is running on the id Tech engine, probably version 7, the power behind *Doom Eternal*, which means Vulkan-only rendering on PC. From what's been shown it certainly looks the part, with the trailer's opening in a sandy desert switching to lush rainforest, a tussle with a Japanese fighter plane, treks through snowy mountain passes and a whip-assisted ascent to a Zeppelin moored over the domes of a European city.

There's also the requisite amount of punching. In fact the trailer seems to glory in it, surely meaning first-person violence will be a major part of the game alongside using the whip to cross gaps and fitting the wooden gears of an ancient machine back together. As is traditional, Nazis are the main targets, with one scene reminiscent of the propeller-assisted punch-out from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Given the state of Jones' romantic life at the end of *Raiders*, an appearance from Marion Jones might be too much to expect, but some secondary characters do appear in the trailer. One is Denholm Elliott's Marcus Brody, the bumbling academic who once got lost in his own museum, while the other is less clear. An investigative reporter named Gina makes a key appearance, likely to be an ally who hopefully won't go the same way as Helena Shaw from *Dial of Destiny*. There's also the villain, Emmerich Voss – a Nazi, naturally, and one who appears to come with a pre-broken nose – and a character referred to as a 'giant' with the face of Tony Todd who's in the habit of breaking into museums and stealing things.

With this mix of old and new, and with MachineGames and Bethesda behind it, *Great Circle* is shaping up to be an interesting new take on an old legend. There's enough talent here to make something really spectacular with the licence, a clone of *Tomb Raider* or *Uncharted* just won't do, so a close eye should be kept on the game's progress.

Ian Evenden



Convenient rope slides provide easy access.



## INDY ISN'T AFRAID OF SNEAKING OR TALKING HIS WAY OUT OF A SITUATION



*Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*



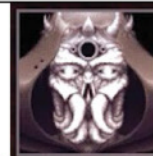
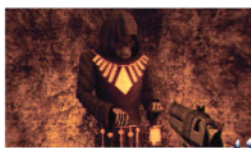
**ABOVE:** Can't wait to punch that face.

**LEFT:** There it is! The great circle!





## Divine Frequency



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
TBADEVELOPER  
Good KarmaPUBLISHER  
Hellforge StudiosLINK  
[shorturl.at/fmLOZ](http://shorturl.at/fmLOZ)

## DIVINE FREQUENCY

This horror-RPG-FPS built in the Doom engine is terrifying

**I** knew I was in for a stomach-churning time with *Divine Frequency*'s demo after I finally acquired my first weapon. I came up to a hallway in the game's vast industrial underbelly and spied an ominous figure looming way down the hall. The light above it cut out, I turned around, and there it was: a horrible faceless mannequin an eyelash's length away.

I panicked, started blasting, and swore so loud my girlfriend heard from down the hall. The mannequin is actually completely harmless, and I just wasted precious ammo and weapon durability on a prank. *Divine Frequency* punked me.

This horror-FPS-RPG launched its first Steam demo during 2023's Realms Deep event, a former mod project now getting reworked into a full game. It's built on GZDoom, the ubiquitous source port of id Software's classic, and it's one of those *Doom*-based games that makes you say, "Wait, you can do this in the *Doom* engine?"

It's looking like a game with some capital-L Lore, casting you as some kind of agent plumbing the depths of a vast and terrible nightmare realm. There were peeks at some distinctly SCP-flavoured background text here, giving that delicious contrast of banal agency-speak trying to wrangle the unknowable horrors around you. It never felt like I was getting beaten over the head with all that Lore, but instead it gave me the great feeling of witnessing the tip of a storytelling iceberg.

## IT NEVER FELT LIKE I WAS GETTING BEAT OVER THE HEAD WITH ALL THAT LORE

The shooting and exploration reminds me most of *System Shock 2*, of all things. You creep along these utterly vile, rusted underhalls ready for freakish creatures to jump out at you from any corner – these things always seem to be positioned right in your blind spot on entering a room. They go down with just one or two hits from the satisfyingly beefy basic pistol, but you're also pretty fragile and these things move fast. I particularly hated (read: loved) one enemy type that both looks and moves like a centipede – awful guys rushing around faster than it feels like anything should.

## IMMERSIVE SCARES

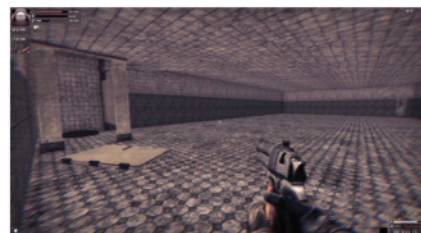
Ammo is scarce, and *Divine Frequency* also cribs *System Shock 2*'s weapon degradation system, one of only a few durability mechanics I've ever enjoyed in a game. An exceedingly rare repair consumable always feels like a godsend whenever you find one, and while I always felt the pressure of my resource constraints, I was never on the verge of the demo being unfinishable.

The demo level takes you through this dreamlike labyrinth where areas transform behind you or even in front of your very eyes, a surreal tech trick I absolutely loved in last year's *Alan Wake 2* and fellow *Doom* project *Myhouse.wad*. In our era of unprecedented graphical and computing power, I would like to see more impossible mindscapes in my videogames.

The demo also features two excellent boss fights, distinct from both each other and the rest of the gameplay loop. One is a puzzle fight, while the other is a straight-up duel focused on timed dodges and a counter mechanic that was instantly intuitive and fun to learn. The potential for a full game that's so generous with its different gameplay styles, always surprising me with unique vistas, puzzles and encounters, has me extremely excited for the complete package.

*Divine Frequency* whips, and there's very little else like it, somehow managing to combine a helpless, overpowering sort of horror with excellent shooting. *Divine Frequency* captures a similar sense of being made less than human in the belly of some great and terrible machine.

*Ted Litchfield*



I'm sure he's a great guy to go drinking with.



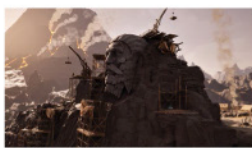




**ABOVE:** Mate, just letting you know, but you've got a bag on your head.

**LEFT:** A dark and disturbing dreamlike labyrinth awaits.





## NEED TO KNOW

## RELEASE

Autumn 2024

## DEVELOPER

Obsidian

## PUBLISHER

Microsoft

## LINK

[avowed.obsidian.net](https://avowed.obsidian.net)

## AVOWED

Obsidian's next RPG goes all in on first-person action

**A**vowed has been at the top of my own, personal most wanted list since that first pre-rendered trailer back in 2020. A first-person, more immersive take on the world of Eora I've loved so much since first playing *Pillars of Eternity* always sounded like just the thing for me.

While we still have plenty of gaps in our knowledge of this RPG, even as its planned release this fall draws near, a recent developer showcase and conversation with *Avowed* director Carrie Patel and gameplay director Gabe Paramo have given us a clearer picture than ever before of this RPG.

*Avowed* takes place in Eora's Living Lands, a northern frontier previously only represented by lore tidbits and potential character backgrounds in the *Pillars of Eternity* games. You're cast as an emissary of the Aedyr Empire, sent to investigate some kind of metaphysical sickness that, going off the trailers and *Avowed's* cover art, manifests as some kind of glowy fungus.

I asked if this was a prequel or sequel to the *Pillars of Eternity* games, but that seems to be a revelation Obsidian's saving for later. Patel explained that *Avowed* will "have some recognisable touch points and a few recognisable characters for returning fans, but you don't have to have any familiarity or experience with *Pillars 1* or *Deadfire* to enjoy *Avowed*".

You'll be creating your own character, but rather than *Pillars'* spread of six races,

you're limited to humans or elves. The lore explanation is that Aedyr was formed of an alliance between these two most vanilla of fantasy species, but in another recent interview with IGN, Patel explained that short kings in particular just wouldn't play nice with *Avowed's* new perspective.

## SWORD AND BOARD

There's still plenty of character customisation though: *Avowed* will have a classless system with particular flexibility when it comes to mixing and matching different combat styles. While I'll miss the specific class fantasy of *Pillars* standbys like Ciphers or Chanters, I did spot what looked like a dialogue option in the developer direct trailer, and Patel confirmed that there would be background options at character creation.

As for the first-person combat, that seems to be a huge focus on Obsidian's part going into *Avowed*, and to such a degree that while there will be dialogue-centric solutions to certain quests and some light stealth, Patel and Paramo revealed that this isn't a game in which you could pull a pacifist run.

For *Avowed's* first-person swording, Obsidian's looking to the best in the game for a lead. Paramo cited *Fatshark's* beloved co-op Warhammer first-person slugfest, *Vermintide*, a game that's made many a true believer out of former first-person melee combat skeptics like myself. "We're trying to get our inspiration from there, just that masterclass in having a sense of hitting and impact."

"I'm definitely really proud of what the gameplay team has done," Patel added. "I really do feel like it's going to stand head and shoulders above when it comes to fantasy first-person action RPG melee combat." That confidence, and the kinetic action shown off in *Avowed's* trailers, has me hopeful that it'll avoid a great pitfall of similar first-person RPGs: dull combat.

## DOING IT RIGHT

When I think of what I love in, say, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Skyrim*, it's not the listless fencing with rude orcs out in the wilderness. Heck, combat in many first-person RPGs is so bad I often feel like sneaking around and avoiding it entirely is the most fun way to play – that's not going

NEW  
INFO

HAS ME HOPEFUL THAT IT'LL  
AVOID A GREAT PITFALL OF  
SIMILAR FIRST-PERSON RPGS







## PREVIEW

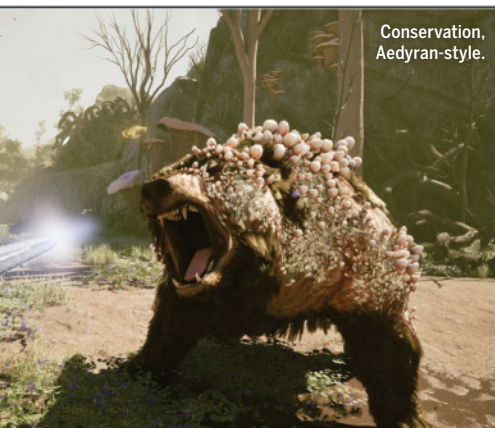
*Avowed*

**RIGHT:** Loving the whole "otherworldly beauty" thing going on here.

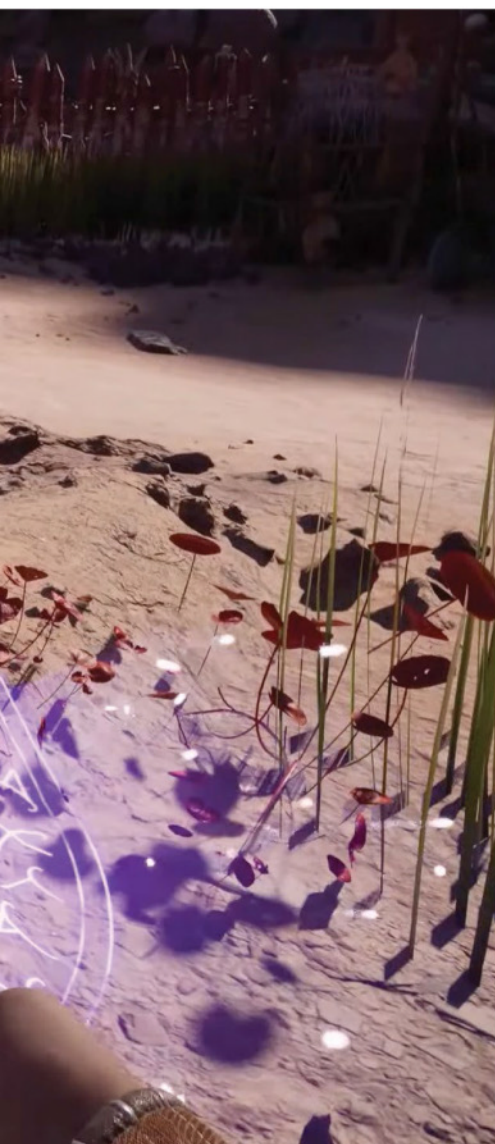
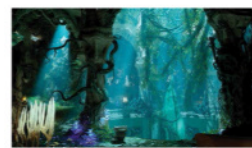
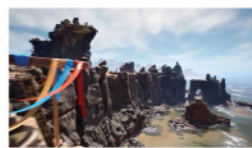
**BELOW:** The lizard became my friend and walked away from this unscathed.







Conservation,  
Aedyran-style.



to be an option for *Avowed*, but with the team dead set on making this the best first-person combat system it can, maybe I won't miss my accustomed playstyle.

On a similar note, There are so many games where magic is just lame. *Skyrim*'s summoning spells and behaviour-altering illusions are sick, but otherwise the magic's all in convenient missile form. *Dragon Age* also disappointed me with its spells, which always felt so weak compared to the reality-warping power its mages are supposed to have.

*Avowed* looks extremely promising on this front, with its most recent trailer demonstrating freezing and shattering enemies, Force-pulling them with telekinesis, and breaking them up with the sort of mass crowd control you don't usually see in a first-person RPG. There's even a gnarly-looking antigravity vortex spell in the first trailer that looks like the bigger brother to the *Mass Effect* series' Singularity ability. In our conversation, Paramo revealed that this is actually a new interpretation of Pull of Eora, a fourth-level Wizard spell featured in *Pillars of Eternity*.

### SIMPLY MAGICAL

That connection has me hopeful that we'll see even more of *Pillars*' wild spells make it into *Avowed*. On the arcane side, I'd love to see battlefield-altering stuff like Wall of Force, or the mass-petrification spell Gaze of the Adragon. One of *Pillars*' signature spell-types was abilities like Ray of Fire, which creates a beam between yourself and an anchor point, damaging any enemies in the way.

That's what the wizard fantasy is all about to me, and more low-fi, old-school RPGs always seemed better able to tap into it – they relied on your imagination to fill the gaps of less photorealistic graphics, or were able to more cheaply introduce awe-inspiring visual effects. When you're trying to do the same thing in a modern game, good RPG magic needs this commitment to cool systemic interactions and even letting you break the game.

One perfect example of that is Arkane Studios' second release, *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*. That game let you go nuts: creating ice surfaces on the floor for enemies to slip on, flinging orcs across the

map with an overpowered, gravity gun-style telekinesis move, and ragdolling nearly every foe with two kicks of your mighty boot. It was almost more of a physics sandbox than an RPG, but a little bit of that spirit could be just the thing to launch *Avowed* into the stratosphere.

### FRIEND ZONE

And we won't be alone when we dive back into Eora: so far, Obsidian's shown off two companions of an unknown total coming to *Avowed*. One of them, Kai, is a member of the big and tall, vaguely aquatic aumaua race, and seems to be fulfilling the role of your snide but loyal sword and shield warrior. I'm less clear on the mechanical niche of the second revealed companion, Giatta, but she seems to hail from Eora's Vailian Republics, the home of *Pillars*' paladin companion, Pallegina.

Patel and Paramo confirmed that there will be more companions in the final game, but didn't reveal how many. When they're not in your active crew, your benchwarmers will hang back at a home base – Patel specifically used the phrase "party camp", calling to mind *Dragon Age: Origins* or *Baldur's Gate III*'s wilderness hideaways rather than the concerted projects of *Pillars*' keep and tall ships.

They seem chatty and eager to comment on the goings-on of your quests, but won't have influence or approval meters to stay on top of. Paramo and Patel explained that they'll have important roles in the main quest, join up with you by set points in the game, and clearly telegraph when a mission ties into their personal arc or requires their expertise. The RPG die-hard in me distrusted such simplification, but then I remembered keeping 11 wiki pages open to track New Vegas companions' influence triggers, and realised it might not be such a bad thing.

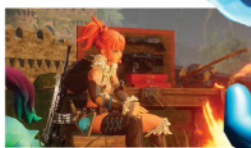
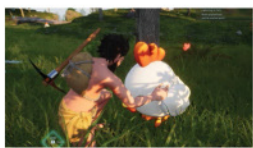
One thing that this gang does have in common with *New Vegas* though? No romance sidequests. Patel and Paramo confirmed as such when talking to Eurogamer. This may not preclude a four-episode arc to wingman for one of them like in *The Outer Worlds* though.

We're starting to get a real picture of *Avowed* now after years of waiting, and I'm excited to sink my teeth into this thing. It's looking like a more action-oriented, user-friendly RPG, but its beautiful, vibrant environments already have me sold on the Living Lands, and I'm eager to see the next iteration of Obsidian's moody, offbeat storytelling.

*Ted Litchfield*

**THE SORT OF MASS CROWD CONTROL YOU DON'T USUALLY SEE IN A FIRST-PERSON RPG**





## NEED TO KNOW

## RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

## DEVELOPER

Pocketpair

## PUBLISHER

Pocketpair

## LINK

[pocketpair.jp/palworld](https://pocketpair.jp/palworld)

## PALWORLD

Shockingly, animal cruelty doesn't make for a fulfilling experience

**I** was morally obligated to keep an eye on *Palworld*. I've been playing *Pokémon* on and off for four fifths of my time on this Earth. I'm a card-carrying *Dwarf Fortress* weirdo, which *Palworld's* lead developer has cited as his favourite game. Ignoring *Palworld* would've been a dereliction of professional duty. Now that I've spent a dozen hours with it following the game's emergence into Early Access, I can comfortably say that duty might have been fine to leave derelict.

*Palworld* is lucky to be arriving in a world where the Switch's proper *Pokémon* games are as rough as they've ever been, with the open world of *Scarlet* and *Violet* visibly tearing itself apart at the seams. *Palworld* might have me soaring over a generic Unreal 5 landscape on the back of a knockoff Charizard, but for a brief moment, it's a glimpse at what an open-world *Pokémon* could be: one that isn't flickering in and out of existence whenever you're arrogant enough to move. I'm a creatures guy! If a game's letting me loose to collect little freaks, I'm content. But once I've landed to add one of *Palworld's* creatures to my base-building roster, I'll remember which game I'm actually playing, because it'll toot out a little triumphant jingle as it informs me that my new friend has the Work Slave passive skill.

Let me put it this way. Watching that first *Palworld* trailer from 2021 was like seeing a picture of Bugs Bunny smoking weed and half-ironically thinking it's sick.

**I START OFF PUNCHING TREES AND PICKING UP ROCKS WHICH BECOME RUDIMENTARY TOOLS**

Actually playing *Palworld* is like having to hang out for hours with somebody who's made Bugs Bunny smoking weed their whole deal. It's over-committing to the bit, except the bit in this case is, well, abusive labour conditions and animal cruelty. And not only is the bit bad – it's actively making the rest of the game worse.

## POKÉMON WITH GUNS?

First: the big question. Is *Palworld* just *Pokémon* with guns? It's certainly doing its best to look the part. If I open up my Poké... Paldeck and scroll through the Pals I've captured in Pal Spheres, I'm mostly left impressed by the hubris of *Palworld's* Japanese developer imitating the *Pokémon* style so closely when it's in the centre of Nintendo's lawsuit kill radius.

In a lot of cases, *Palworld* isn't mimicking *Pokémon's* creature design aesthetic as much as it is building from the reassembled pieces of existing *Pokémon*, adding a colour swap and a couple of tweaked details to hide the Frankenstein stitching. It's a surreal gallery of familiar eyes, limbs, and silhouettes. Vixy is an Eevee with someone else's head.

Mammorest is a mossy Donphan.

Jolthog? Shaymin, but electric.

Anubis? Lucario, but Egyptian.

Robinquill is Decidueye minus owl.

Nitewing is Staraptor plus Mega

Pidgeot, and Shadowbeak is... let's say Corviknight x Silvally x Zekrom. With an Arceus belt. I could go on. That said, there are some charming original designs: the profoundly dopey Relaxaurus is a joy to watch waddle around my farm and I've got a couple of fiery goats on pancake-grilling duty. They've got a good vibe.

Gameplay-wise, though, *Pokémon: Gun Version* doesn't actually have that many *Pokémon* with guns. My first few hours in *Palworld* told me that it's fine. It's functional. It runs OK, barring some occasional chugging during area transitions. I start off punching trees and picking up rocks, which become rudimentary tools, which help me gather a scattering of other resources, which let me inch through incremental technology and material upgrades.

So ore becomes ingots, campfires become cookpots become kitchens, workbenches become... better workbenches. It's a pretty linear







**ABOVE:** Nintendo's lawyers flying in to serve papers.

**LEFT:** Whatever you do don't mention Poké...



## PREVIEW

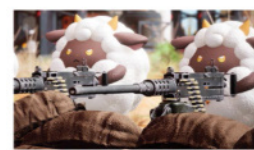
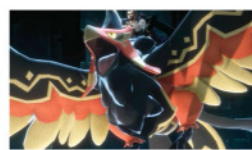
### Palworld

**RIGHT:** Yeah, I'll use that Pal, the one with the gigantic chaingun.

**BELOW:** Gotta shoot 'em all!







progression, without any individual upgrades that feel particularly exciting (excluding my first gun). For the most part, it's a pretty standard base-building survival game, except of course that I've got a team of Pals to assist me.

*Palworld* plays best back at base, where mapping my Pals' types and abilities to production tasks adds an interesting dimension to the otherwise rote advancement through material and tech tiers. Out in the wild, Pals join in combat against wildlife and hostile poachers. Generally I can have one Pal deployed to fight alongside me at once, attacking with their equipped abilities. The combat is serviceable, but made a little clumsy by Pals getting tripped up on geometry and bullet-sponge damage scaling on what you're attacking.

### GOTTA CRUSH 'EM ALL

And it turns out I'm typically the only one handling the gunfighting. Each Pal species has an active ability I can tell them to use, some of which can only be accessed after I've researched and built an upgrade at my base. Surprisingly, there's not a high representation of gun nuts in the wildlife of the Palpagos islands. That AK-wielding pseudo-Grookey you might've seen isn't constantly bearing arms; it's using an ability on cooldown. From what I've seen, the selection of Pals with gun abilities is smaller than I expected, and of the ones that are present, a few are locked behind higher-end technology tiers.

I can't say I'm particularly disappointed by the lack of more gun-toting Pals, but *Palworld* seems self-conscious about it. In my dozen hours with *Palworld*, it felt like it was struggling to fulfil a shock humour quota that its marketing set, and ended up weighing down the pieces that could otherwise be built into a better game.

Advancing my base requires the supernatural talents of my Pals, and finding new types of Pals in the wilderness to match base-building niches is a mental puzzle I enjoyed. If I want to grow crops while I'm out gathering ore, I'll need a grass-type Pal to plant seeds. I could use my big green dinosaur with the best planting skill, but it eats up a lot of food and can't join in on any other tasks. Or I

could tap in my friendly grass squirrel who plants a little slower, but can assist with logging and transporting goods.

It's a fun set of factors to juggle. Problem is, that juggling act turns into a slog just so the game can deliver a bad punchline. *Palworld* isn't really asking, "What if *Pokémon* had guns?" *Palworld* is asking, "What if you could mangle the *Pokémon* beneath the crushing weight of industry?" It's not tongue-in-cheek. It's mid-2000s Newgrounds edgelord.

### ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Across the board, *Palworld* is slanted towards getting me to abuse my Pals. All my production tasks back at base take a while, whether I and my Pals are making arrows, smelting ore, or turning my wheat and milk into pancakes – a single one of which takes almost as long as cooking a pancake in real life. As Pals work, their Sanity decreases (already a bad sign). Keeping them fed and happy when they're working is a delicate balance of lengthy production times. And because I can only have so many Pals working at once, the pace of progression is pretty glacial.

Enter the Monitoring Stand: a building where I can increase my Pals' work rate from normal to cruel, or even brutal. Forcing them to work faster increases their sanity depletion until it's untenable, increasing their chance of injuries. They'll get depressed. They'll get ulcers. They'll get fractures. I could heal those injuries with medicine, but that would require me to divert Pal slots to medicine production – adding another pressure to work the remaining Pals harder. The crafting and survival in *Palworld* is only interesting when it's driving me to make decisions on how I deploy my Pals, but instead of doubling down on what sets it apart, *Palworld* draws out its progression just so I can terrorise my Pals for a shortcut.

Maybe that's funny for somebody? I don't know, I aged out of shock humour a decade or two ago, and I'm not convinced it's enough to sustain a game once the attention shifts elsewhere. Even if I can change the world settings to multiply resource and production rates, *Palworld* would be better off spending more effort on finding interesting ways to deploy its Pals. When the game's trickle of resource rates means the fastest way for me to get my next upgrade is to capture Pals just to harvest them with a censored butchering animation, it only makes me wish it wasn't wasting my time in the first place.

Lincoln Carpenter

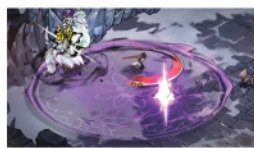


## THE SELECTION OF PALS WITH GUN ABILITIES IS SMALLER THAN I EXPECTED



## PREVIEW

### Realm of Ink



#### NEED TO KNOW

##### RELEASE

TBC (demo available)

##### DEVELOPER

Leap Studio, Maple Leaf Studio

##### PUBLISHER

Leap Studio, Maple Leaf Studio

##### LINK

[shorturl.at/tyCH7](http://shorturl.at/tyCH7)

## REALM OF INK

### Shades of Hades in an inky roguelite adventure

**T**here's never anything in the pots, is there? At least in *Zelda* games you sometimes come across a piece of heart while going on a smashing spree through someone's carefully compiled crockery collection, but in the modern roguelite they're empty, pure window dressing, as the real pickups are earned from defeating enemies.

*Realm of Ink* is a great looking game, taking inspiration from hand-drawn Chinese art that elevates it to something you won't easily tire of looking at, especially in motion. There's a softness to its visuals, the detail of weapon racks, forges, monkey statues and braziers easily picked out but not overwhelming. It's a Unity game, and the Steam demo provided good 4K performance on an RTX 3080.

There's an Ancient Greek inspiration too. Specifically, *Hades*. The game is an isometrically viewed roguelite with an emphasis on creating builds to smack and slash your way through crowds of foes and bosses. There's a realm between runs where you can switch weapons, talk to characters, practice combat moves and try to explain the nature of your rotund pet, Momo, to an anthropomorphic fox.

Step through a portal, and you're taken to the game itself. *Realm of Ink* has a story that dovetails nicely with the repetitive, run-based nature of roguelites: main character Red has a revelation one day while smacking down the fox demon that razed her home. It's revealed that she's

actually a character in a story, fated to repeat the same task and controlled by It, the spirit of the book. Following this epiphany, Red manages to leave the story, entering an inn, called Fox Inn, that's run by a fox who comments on Red's 'fox ink'. There's also a fox in a mech suit.

#### ICED INK

Eventually you'll unlock two other characters, and fight through four worlds while collecting upgrades. There are Ink Gems that map to the triggers of a controller and are basically special attacks on a cooldown. Fairly soon after starting through the snowy early levels I have a shield and an AoE attack, and Red has a useful dash move during which she's invulnerable, which by default has two charges before needing to refill.

The dash is essential if you don't want to be swamped by enemies, or to avoid clearly telegraphed attacks, and can be upgraded, though cursed relics are available that have a negative effect along with their useful gifts, such as removing your invincibility while dashing, or slowing you down the more money you carry.

Along the way, you'll meet traders to sell you food and upgrades, researchers who can enhance your inks and entities who bestow random gifts. And then there's Momo. Your companion changes form depending on which inks you have equipped, and will go into combat on your behalf.

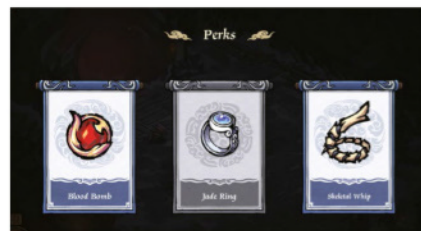
The game becomes a balancing act between light and heavy attacks, the recharging special moves provided by the inks, and your dash. All the while you're collecting coins and other currencies to buy upgrades, some of which persist between runs. It adds up to the usual roguelite chaos, with attack effects going off, numbers rising as you do damage, and enemies charging you from all directions.

Despite its clear influences, there's a lot of originality in *Realm of Ink*. The art style gives it immediate visual appeal, the story makes sense of the looping gameplay, and the obsession with foxes adds a quirky twist that's sure to be explained once the full game is released. For now, its similarities to other games in the genre suggest it needs a little more time to develop a distinctive identity.

Ian Evenden



PLAYED IT



## THE DASH IS ESSENTIAL IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE SWAMPED BY ENEMIES





ABOVE: Even this trader uses foxes to sell his goods.

LEFT: This whirling blade is reminiscent of *Death Must Die*.











## NEED TO KNOW

## RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

## DEVELOPER

Keen Games GmbH

## PUBLISHER

Keen Games GmbH

## LINK

[shorturl.at/gmCD5](https://shorturl.at/gmCD5)

## ENSHROUDED

Valheim meets Zelda in this co-op fantasy survival crafting RPG

**C**o-op survival crafting games are not only numerous on PC, but the quality and scale of them is now at a higher level than it has even been before. A few years ago if you wanted to get your co-op base-building, cooking, weapon crafting and monster slaying kicks then you'd have to venture forth into the realms of, mostly, low-fi, small-scale indie games.

*Enshrouded* is *Valheim* crossed with *Zelda*: a big, mysterious and mostly serene fantasy realm where you build a base, craft gear and weapons, cook over a campfire, go exploring, fight monsters and complete quests. And, if you like, you can bring along a whole bunch of your friends for the adventure – *Enshrouded* supports a somewhat ridiculous 16 players.

The realm in *Enshrouded* has hit hard times – the shroud of the title has consumed much of the land in a hazy murk that saps your life force and mutates living things into twisted monsters. As a newly awakened member of the Flameborn you need to reclaim the world from the evil fog and that means... well, it's a survival game, so it means chopping down trees, picking up rocks, building a hut, and crafting some starter gear. Once a base is established and a few local wolves and rabbits have been hacked into fur and meat chunks, it's time to start exploring the world both above the deadly shroud and deep within it.

The world is a big one. A really big one. In the 18 hours I've played I estimate I've

only uncovered maybe a 16th of the total map. Despite its rather standard game engine, *Enshrouded* boasts a pretty and, quite frequently, visually epic world, too. Fantasy vistas there are a plenty, while during the day its environments are bathed in a soft light that seems well suited to adventuring and crafting. Delve deep into ancient ruins and the game's art style delivers suitable levels for a dark, dangerous fantasy dungeon. Is *Enshrouded* going to go down in PC gaming history as a graphical wonder? No, but the dev deserves a hat-tip for making the game look this good.

## AN EPIC SCALE

It can be a difficult world to explore, though mostly in a good way. More than once I've been headed toward an icon on my map only to run into, for example, an entire mountain range. Maybe I can scale that mountain by doing a lot of running and jumping, but sometimes I need to divert around it instead, which could lead me to a massive enshrouded gorge, or a huge river of lava, a sheer cliff face, a ruined town full of monsters.

## PLAYED IT

Going around or through those obstacles can lead to others, and before I know it what seemed like a short journey north has turned me in a completely different direction and I've been sent even further from my destination than when I started. Just like a good adventure should. There are plenty of icons on my map that I still haven't been able to reach simply because I haven't found a viable route yet, even with a glider and grappling hook in my pack.

At the same time, the world can feel a bit on the empty side, because between those points of interest there's sometimes just not all that much to find other than some nice scenery and a few intermittent monster attacks. It's also a world that pretty strongly cries out for a mount of some sort. A little horsey would go a long way in *Enshrouded*, a friendly creature to ride so it's not always 100% running across great distances along with some intermittent gliding (and for all I know, maybe there are mounts available somewhere?) But, yes, the sooner I can mount up on Dobbin the better. And hopefully without any need for paid Dobbin DLC horse armour.

THE SHROUD OF THE TITLE HAS CONSUMED MUCH OF THE LAND IN A HAZY MURK





### ➤ SURVIVAL MADE EASY

As a survival game, *Enshrouded* is so forgiving I almost can't call it a survival game. Taking a cue from *Valheim*, cooking and eating isn't a necessity, it's just beneficial to your health bar or can buff your damage or stamina. You also don't lose most of your stuff upon death – die, and you'll keep all of your equipped gear, crafted items, and everything in your two rows of quickbar slots. The only stuff you'll lose will be raw resources you've collected and are storing in your inventory, which means sometimes I go back to retrieve my gear, but other times I just shrug and go do something else.

Often, even retrieving your stuff isn't a terrible hassle. I miscalculated a glide across a lava river and died, but my tombstone of goods was placed at the edge of the cliff where I had jumped rather than at the bottom where I perished. That gives me licence to make as many stupid repeat gliding attempts as I want, really.

Just as forgiving as the survival systems is the skill tree. There are no classes, but gain some XP and you can spend points on skills that travel in any direction you want – toward wizardry, tanking, stealth, survival and so on. Respec is cheap, too, so if you find a new weapon or wand you want to main it's a snap to redistribute your skill points and completely change your build. I was partaking in extra damage from stealth ranged attacks with a minor in maging until I found a wicked battleaxe in a chest. Now I do a double jump with a ground pound attack to hit crowds of enemies at once. When I find something better, I might change my build all over again.

### FUN WITH FRIENDS

Apart from a few quests guided by journals telling me to wipe out a shroud boss, most have revolved around rescuing a collection of NPC craftspeople – a blacksmith, hunter, farmer, alchemist and a carpenter. Those missions are fun and feel vaguely *Zelda*-ish: find a mysterious, multi-level temple filled with hidden switches and traps, then navigate your way through them and come out with some extra treasures and a new pal, er, companion. Back at my base I can place

these NPCs where I want and they open up new crafting recipes and workbenches. I do wish these NPCs felt more like, y'know... people. Once in my base they just stand where I placed them. It'd be nice if they walked around a bit as if they were guests and not simply quest-giving furniture.

The next round of quests mostly involves retrieving tools for those same NPCs, like the carpenter's table saw and blacksmith's forge. This is where the skill curve leaps up pretty dramatically. I'm used to smelting ore into ingots and cutting logs into planks being some pretty early game activities, but just trying to reach the parts of the map the quests to acquire these items is pretty brutal for a low-level character. Crossing a certain region of the map introduces some real nasty foes. Looking at my map, there are now several sad little tombstone icons forming a fenceline of failure.

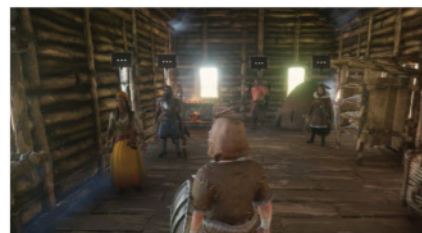
### COSY BUT UNCLEAR

I'm liking *Enshrouded* for the most part so far – it's got a nice mix of cosy crafting and basebuilding, plus dangerous expeditions into deadly zones of the map – but it hasn't entirely grabbed me yet the way a game like *Valheim* did. Seeing craftsmen standing stock still in my base, compared to watching *Palworld*'s critters run around doing all my chores for me, it's a little hard to not want a bit more from *Enshrouded*'s NPCs. It's a lot more fun with friends: the hour or two Andy and I spent exploring and getting bodied by a boss was a hoot.

But there's so much more to *Enshrouded* that we've not experienced yet that's it hard to make too clear a judgement on which way this co-op survival experience is going to go. It's in Early Access right now as well, so I'm sure there's going to be evolution within its systems and, potentially, overall gameplay experience. And that overall fantasy experience will be key to whether I keep playing, as right now it is a pretty world with plenty of fun and engaging content that doesn't quite hold fully together. Is that to be expected for this genre? Maybe.

Right now I plan to keep playing, but I think it is fair to say that *Enshrouded* hasn't won me over yet. It's a game in that grey zone where you don't quite now how to feel about a game – I feel engaged with various crafting projects and I'm keen to take more long exploratory romps through the map, but for a world full of magic it hasn't felt all that magical yet.

Chris Livingston



The bigger they are, the harder they crush you.

## NOW I DO A DOUBLE JUMP WITH A GROUND POUND TO HIT CROWDS OF ENEMIES





**ABOVE:** Environments can be very pretty, with god rays illuminating expansive vistas.

**LEFT:** Certain areas of the map are deadlier than others, so being prepared is key.





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# WHEELIE

Freewheeling with Belfast-based indie studio Billy Goat Entertainment and its next project, **PARCEL CORPS**

# GOOD

BY MATT POSKITT







W

as it a dream? No, it was *Parcel Corps*!" These were the words uttered by Billy Goat Entertainment studio director Will Barr upon showing me the launch trailer for the indie developer's new bicycle adventure game. It was here that I had the pleasure of meeting the team and going hands-on with world-exclusive gameplay for its upcoming release.

It's a mild, grey February morning in Belfast. The streets are relatively quiet. Appropriately, a transport strike had been in full effect the previous day meaning no buses or trains were operating. As a result, an influx of cyclists are now on the road.

About ten minutes from the city centre, nestled in between an estate agent and an independent deli, Billy Goat Entertainment's headquarters can be found. If you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't figure it out from the exterior, as there's no signage or other indication of a games studio hard at work on its next project. This is all a far cry

from the bustling vibrant sunny avenues of New Island where the world of *Parcel Corps* is found.

Taking inspiration from *Jet Set Radio*, *Sunset Overdrive* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, players are put in control of one of three bicycle courier corporations competing to become the most profitable business in the land. It's bursting with personality, satirical commentary and an addictive gameplay loop that is easy to lose hours in. This primarily stems from the open-world-like levels (of which there are eight) that offer great nostalgia if you're familiar with *Sunset City* and *Tokyo-to* in terms of layout. You'll want to explore every corner, and are rewarded with the most interesting routes found in the upper reaches, rather than on the ground.

After completing a short tutorial to get to grips with the controls, players are set free to explore and deliver packages to continue the main storyline. "It's a jovial romp through this colourful, sun-kissed city," says Barr, who cycled a lot during his teenage years. "You're a bicycle courier riding along walls, grinding along rails, doing all of your normal bicycle courier kind of things. It's very arcadey. It's a pleasant experience." He jokes about taking up a job at Deliveroo or Just Eat if game development doesn't work out. Ironically, this is where the idea for *Parcel Corps* first originated.

It's easy to spot those design influences in the nine playable characters, which are split between the three separate companies: Brooklyn's East Coast Couriers, the Wallaby Wheelers from down under, and the pan-European Das-la Post, who resemble that of a failed collaboration between Amazon and Daft Punk.

I spent a good 90 minutes just bombing around the Commerical District (the level that was available to try in a public demo on Xbox back in December), a fairly large town centre that includes a construction site and shopping mall to traverse. Grind rails, halfpipes and ramps blanket every street, providing ample opportunities to get some

PLAYERS ARE PUT  
IN CONTROL OF  
ONE OF THREE  
BICYCLE COURIER  
CORPORATIONS

air. Even the cars can be used as trampolines to bounce back into the action and avoid the oncoming traffic that defeats all momentum. Being hit takes the wind out of your wheels, requiring a good few seconds for your courier to either whistle for a new bike to be thrown into his hands from offscreen, or to grab a spare out of his Mary Poppins-like backpack.

The controls can be a bit fiddly at the start, as you learn to skid, slide, grind, bunny hop and boost around the island. Characters have a mobile device that they can pull out whenever stationed or riding the bike, which does a good job of replicating the real-life awkwardness of managing a phone on the move (not that we should be encouraging that sort of behaviour). The mobile displays your map, lists all tasks and has a camera that is used to scan QR codes to initiate missions.

On top of this, a small chat screen similar to that of





Parcel Corps is described as "more Tony Hawk's Pro Skater than Skate".



## COURIER FAVOUR

Meet the three rival courier corporations all vying for your employment



**DAS-LA POST**  
**GREGORIE**

Gregorie, Veloz and Anneke make up the ultra-professional, pan-European, Das-la Poste.



**WALLABY WHEELERS**  
**JESS**

Jess, Ross and Zain are the Anglo-Australian start-up known as the Wallaby Wheelers.



**EAST COAST COURIERS**  
**ROMERO**

Text: Romero, Sakura and Darryl headline Brooklyn's own East Coast Couriers.

Twitch is found in the top right-hand corner where fans can rate your performance. If you execute some radical tricks they will send messages of encouragement, whereas if you fall they won't be so kind (in comparison to the real web they're Mother Teresa).

Over time you will earn more followers, though I'm told it won't affect your final score. It's more for display than anything.

What I found clever was assigning the front and back brakes to the controller triggers, again bringing that sense of realism but also replicating the feeling of downhill mountain biking. It's hugely satisfying, and equally useful when performing a 180-degree turn. It's a set of controls that will be fun to master the more you play. I'm already imagining the possibilities of just what the speedrunning community could do.

The mission structure is simple, essentially making deliveries from A to B with different rules in place along

the way, such as not crashing at any point. Additionally, a Delivery Rush mode is unlocked early on in which you race between businesses to pick up and deliver parcels that then add time bonuses every time a drop-off is made, increasing the money you walk away with. Think the gameplay of *Crazy Taxi*.

I'm informed that general missions will evolve as the game goes on with the "bonkers" narrative being kept under wraps for the time being. "You're just trying to survive the gig economy and make an honest dime," Barr explains. "We have a maniacal villain – known as Rich Villainé who wants to melt the polar caps, naturally – who steps in, starts causing hassle, and is going to affect your bottom line. So you need to deal with him... and save the world!" Just a normal day as a cycle courier, then.

### SATIRICAL STYLE

Made up of around 18 employees, Billy Goat Entertainment was established in 2010 before releasing *Her Majesty's Spiffing* in 2016 and



Would you complain  
about a delivery  
from this guy?



👉 *Supermarket Shriek* in 2019 – both utilise the same exaggerated satirical humour that looks to be unleashed to its full potential in *Parcel Corps*. It's this satirical style that decorates every hallway of the Northern Irish studio; deprecating jokes about failing into bankruptcy if the project fails or jibes between colleagues that they'll be out of a job by the end of the month were a dime a dozen during my visit.

Over 10,000 videogame workers lost their jobs in 2023 and another 6,000-plus have met the same fate in 2024 already. That uncertainty, and “all eggs in one basket” predicament, as one staff member tells me, is a very real and very scary factor. As social media continues to be ablaze with layoffs on a near-daily basis, I found it uplifting in these dark times that the team addressed the realities of modern game development with a smile and the same humour that has helped their games find an audience.

For instance, the *Parcel Corps* description offers up the chance to “escape the mundanity of daily life

and slip into Spandex” as a bicycle messenger before going on to say how you can “forget the security, stable salary and basic workplace rights less cool jobs offer”. This then carries over into the game with numerous unjust deductions – tax, admin, marketing, etc – taken off your final salary leaving a pittance.

If you then head to the developer's website, it reads “Purveyors of moderately amusing video games,” a statement that again plays on its funny side. “We don't want to get ahead of ourselves,” Barr says, addressing the tagline. “We started off doing commercial animation work and then moved into work-for-hire game development... There came a point in the company's history when we thought statistically we were more likely to fail, and go to the wall, or go bankrupt, or whatever. So we may as well just try to make something that we thought was fun and enjoyable. That was kind of the root of it all.

## HAPPY OUT

*Billy Goat Entertainment on the Northern Irish games industry*



**MICHAEL MCDONALD**  
LEAD  
ENVIRONMENT  
ARTIST

“I'm really enjoying reaching out to my friend network, and trying to convince them that this is a really cool place to work, and Belfast is a really nice city. There's a lot of indie game development over here.”



**RACHEL GANDEV-JOHNSON**  
LEAD LEVEL  
DESIGNER

“There's been some really good initiatives that have come about in recent years, from not just graduates but people that are just looking to take their first steps in games... it's definitely on the up.”



**WILL BARR**  
STUDIO  
DIRECTOR

“We have The Pixel Mill. It's an incubator that is funded predominantly by an organisation called Northern Ireland Screen, which is similar to Screen England. There's a lot of start-ups coming out of there, with some pretty cool ideas”



**"THAT DECISION CAME ABOUT BECAUSE I'M ACTUALLY AN INCREDIBLE NARCISSIST"**

"So we made what we thought was a moderately amusing point-and-click adventure game, purely because life is so miserable otherwise. We don't want to contribute to misery."

Most notably, Barr features in *Parcel Corps* as a heightened version of himself. "That decision came about because I'm actually an incredible narcissist, and whenever I'm not in here working on this game, I'm standing at home looking in the mirror," he

laughs. Dressed in Lycra from head to toe and stretching awkwardly between lines of dialogue, his overly enthusiastic bicycle messenger is one of the first NPCs you encounter in the demo. It's also a role he is reprising from the promotional trailers that comically see the man coercing strangers into signing up to the career, exploiting his staff and shaving his legs in the bathroom.

"We do break the fourth wall a little bit. We thought it would be funny if it was the developers were telling you how to play the game. It also means that we can shoehorn a joke in later... whenever you return to that part of the world, Billy Goat Entertainment has mysteriously disappeared. It's just gone out of business, which is something that we're obviously just sitting here expecting to happen at some point. It's a way of mentally preparing us for that inevitability."

While Barr isn't sure whether his in-game alter ego will make the final cut (I really hope it does) a whole host of zany characters are set to appear – 28 in fact, all with voice acting. One of the most memorable is the Wine King, a vendor with a bottle of Merlot on his head who speaks like Charles Dance after one too many glasses. "Bully for you," he scoffs after his delivery is successfully made without damaging the fragile package.

Another bizarre character is Ehrmon Trout of Ehrmon Trout Fish 'n' Chips, a half-man, half-trout working out of a camper van that clearly riffs Mike Ehrmantraut of *Breaking Bad* fame. I came across further nods to *Squid Game*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Steve Irwin, Angela Lansbury and a

mashup of Samus Aran and Darth Vader, so the pop culture references are in abundance.

In many ways, *Parcel Corps* is the serene meets the strange, with a layer of political criticism on everything from capitalism to pollution to social media. "It's meant to be a little bit satirical and it touches on many subjects like green energy, social media and more. There are massive multinational corporations that have an immense amount of influence on governments," says Barr.

"We're trying very hard to be funny. It's meant to be a bit of a send-up of the gig economy. At the end of the day, I'd like to think of game developers as essentially being struggling artists, and surviving from one gig to the next. So I kind of feel that we empathise with the plight of those in these service industries."

He adds: "All we can do is draw people's attention to it and try to laugh at it, because we're completely pants at doing anything else."

## 2016 PROTOTYPE

*Parcel Corps* is being built for PC, PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S as a current-gen only release. This was decided upon due to the increased time that it takes to develop a game to today's standards. That said, the idea has been gestating since 2016. At one point a last-gen prototype was put together as well.

"We've had this in the back of our minds since then," Barr recalls. "And fortunately, the previous game [*Supermarket Shriek*] financially did OK, and then 🙄"



Old Town takes inspiration from Edinburgh.



we were able to shovel all of that cash into developing a prototype for this one. Ultimately, we were able to hoodwink various parties [Secret Mode is handling the publishing] down the line into parting with a modest amount of cash of their own. And that set us on our way.”

It's a big step up in terms of scale, tripling the length of its previous release, *Her Majesty's Spiffing*, to a 12-hour or so campaign for *Parcel Corps* and further incentives that can push the duration past the 20-hour mark. It's also seen the team having to cut back on the open world being fully interconnected alongside a nighttime mode being scrapped. This has proved to be one of the biggest hurdles for the studio, according to lead environment artist Michael McDonald who joined the project in May 2023. “There's just so much to get through which is equally exciting and scary because there's just so much to deliver,” he says.

*Parcel Corps* utilises a bright and poppy cel-shaded art style that you'd be forgiven for thinking was the studio's first choice considering how gorgeous it looks. “A large part of the reason for going down that particular art direction is that photoreal stuff is very expensive and very time-consuming,” McDonald explains. “Whereas something more stylised – you can just get away with so much stuff. If that lip-sync doesn't quite match up, it doesn't matter because it's a cartoon. That's why we do it.”

“I started on this project coming up to three years ago now,” Rachel Gandey-Johnson, who acts as the

lead level designer, adds. “I think the initial ambition that we had for the game was much larger. We had some great ideas to have basically a seamless sort of world, and then realising very quickly just how much work that would be, trying to piece everything together.

“From a design point of view, we try and make as much of the gameplay space as traversable as possible, and are trying to account for every single line that a player might make; every single wall ride; every jump that they might take, and places that they can just get into out-of-bounds territories, and up on rooftops, and things like that.”

Another challenge is recruitment, having needed to build the workforce up to a point where it can handle a project of this scope. “It is hard to find a good staff,” Barr admits. “And whenever we come across one, we do like to hold onto them, and basically rinse the talent out of them – just until they're bone dry, and nothing more than lifeless husks of what they were before...”

#### EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON

All of these efforts have been put into the Old Town in recent days, the second level in *Parcel Corps* that was exclusively premiered to PC Gamer. While not quite fully complete, the Edinburgh-inspired zone is distinctively different from the Commercial District. With fewer vehicles, more pedestrians, a seafront and a cathedral to play around in, it's a much calmer setting.

That is until I burst through one of the cathedral's windows en route to smash a time trial set by a middle-aged man in Lycra, affectionately named MAMIL. It's also here that I first encounter the overly British police, who are determined to chuck me in the back of a van and spit me out in a different part of the level whenever captured. They march around in a way not dissimilar to the military in *Jet Set Radio*, except these guys have custodian helmets

**THE EDINBURGH-INSPIRED ZONE IS DISTINCTIVELY DIFFERENT FROM THE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT**

There's always a shortcut.

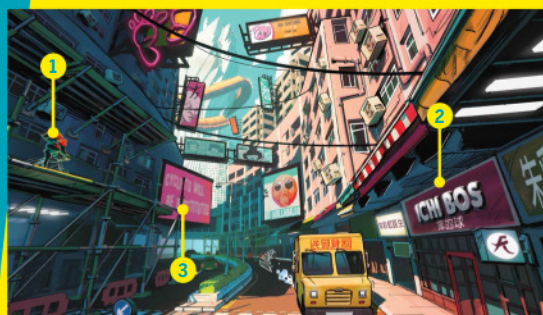






## WELCOME TO NEW ISLAND

*A vibrant metropolis to explore*



### 1 HIGH ROAD

The most optimum routes around New Island are found up above, with purposefully positioned scaffolding, ramps and rails, as opposed to jostling with the traffic found on the roads.

### 2 BUSINESS BOOMING

Ten businesses will appear across all eight levels that will span a campaign that will take approximately 12 hours, with 100% completion expected to stretch to around 20 hours.

### 3 ON AIR

A live-action broadcast will bookend every level, with a newscaster explaining the state of play and the shady ongoingings of Rich Villainé, similar to that of the news sequences in 1987's *RoboCop*.

and hi-vis jackets. You'd think that would make them easier to spot, but not quite.

A cause of this might be the camera. Playing this particular section on a Steam Deck at 30fps (the PC and console versions will run at 60fps), I found the sluggishness of the camera more noticeable. I felt it needed to be sharper and grant more freedom when looking ahead or at what's above, suffering from a limited range of movement. It wouldn't be until the last second that I'd spot an oncoming car charging around the bend, or a policeman in pursuit.

This didn't prevent my time spent in this ruby-painted town from being a treat, seeing the framework ahead of the finished product. For now, *Parcel Corps* has a wonderful sense of fun fused into its controls, level design and movement that remind me of early noughties gaming in the best possible way.

Set to launch sometime in 2024, in some ways I can see *Parcel Corps* being a

perfect summer release. On the other hand, I'd be willing to wait until 2025 so that it gets the necessary polish to create a better experience and set itself up for the best chance of success. So what about the people at Billy Goat Entertainment? What would success look like for them 12 months down the line?

"I think ideally we'd get a couple of DLC levels out there," Gandey-Johnson answers, before suggesting, "Maybe we'll do a sequel, or some completely new game".

McDonald agrees, "I'd be really excited if we got a great reception and we are given the chance to make some DLC because I feel that we've put together this great team and I kind of want to keep going."

For Barr, the end goal is as simple as keeping the lights on, "Look, at the end of the day, this is essentially a hobby that some of us have managed to string out into a somewhat viable career path, and the dream is just to keep that going and keeping the wheels turning. That would be a success." ■



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## FEATURE

### *The Best Non-Traditional War Games*





PC GAMER

# THE BEST NON-TRADITIONAL WAR GAMES

Is it possible for wargamers to  
give peace a chance?

By Matt Killeen



S

hoot = 1. Wait = 0.  
Hit = 1. Miss = 0.  
The language  
of videogame  
technology lends  
itself to conflict.  
It's been part of  
its DNA since *Spacewar!* took MIT  
by storm in 1962, and  
we've been playing war  
on the tabletop, from  
Chess to Risk, for  
thousands of years. But...

War is a preoccupation of mine. As a writer of historical fiction, I'm immersed in battle. It's a dark fascination, especially for a pacifist of sorts, but wars show humanity at its very best and its very, very worst. They are the turning

points of history itself. We are defined by them.

I'm also a gamer, and love sneaking and sniping, dropping bombs and torpedoing ships. However, that can often provoke moral questions that I struggle to answer. Besides, we're in a period of high-profile conflict, again, and it's on our screens, 24/7. We may crave escapism at times like these, but should we make fictional war when there are so many for whom it's a daily reality?

So, I set out to find war games playable today on PC that don't ask you to do that, at all. This was not an easy ride by any means, and I found varying degrees of success for sure.

## THE RULES

1. Not just pacifist runs, but games that are built around their nonviolence.
2. Healer characters in squad shooters don't count.
3. No anti-war videogames, like *Spec-Ops: The Line*, or *The Great War: Western Front*.



RELEASED Jan 2024 DEVELOPER Brave Lamb Studio SA

# War Hospital

Playing medical administrator on the Western Front

**T**he First World War is solid ground for a pacifist narrative. Never has the futility of the whole mess been writ as large as on the Western Front. *War Hospital* puts you in charge of a failing field hospital on the very edge of the trenches in 1918, balancing morale, resources and staffing to save as many lives as possible.

'It's called triage' is a stock trope for murderous villains in many media, but this simulation comes down to the infamous trolley problem. Do you kill one person if it means saving more? Here, the yawning horror of shuffling the critical cases into the "Denied" file and consigning them to death so that your tired surgeons can save others, is occasionally

punctuated with their curses and invective. It's especially hard watching them deteriorate, waiting for a surgery slot that just isn't coming. There's a narrative, but you soon find yourself opting out of the humanity of it all. You start out reading everyone's file, prioritising family men or the particularly interesting cases, but in short order you're just looking at their wounds and making a cold calculation. You stop noticing the absence of regret in the aftermath. Your cold ruthlessness is an asset, and the next wave of injured is just around the corner. It's deeply chilling.

Then, as patients recover, you end up sending them back to the trenches a few miles away, otherwise you'll be overrun. It's another case of triage that feels like a betrayal.

CHARGING AROUND IN  
YOUR BULLDOZER IS  
FUN AND CLEARING  
AN AREA IS VERY  
SATISFYING







RELEASED Jan 23 DEVELOPER Madnetic

## WWII Rebuilder

Cleaning up after conflict

**I** expected a city builder of some kind, balancing Marshall Plan money with a lack of resources in Europe post-WWII, but what I got was a mix of *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* and *House Flipper*. Clear away the ruins and detritus of the conflict by hammer, shovel or machine, before renovating and repairing each area. Then, step inside a waiting shadowy figure to witness the world at war.

Charging around in your bulldozer is fun, and clearing an area is very satisfying, even if the building itself is a bit underwhelming, and you have the option of continuing the beautification work in a sandbox mode once your tasks are complete. It can be a bit fiddly, especially when doing brickwork, and suffers from some annoying inconsistencies, but there are some great snippets about historical events and some lovely details. If cutting metal at Morrigan Station is your thing, you'll find much to like here.

RELEASED Nov 2020 DEVELOPER Gard

## Field Hospital: Dr Taylor's Story

Alt-history WWII triage

**T** reading some of the same ground, this game concentrates on the triage aspect of your alt-history WWII field hospital, while investigating... something. It's not immediately clear why you're looking back at Dr Taylor's past from the present day, but you flash back to his wartime exploits and you've a job to do. The severity of your patients' injuries isn't the clearest, and I think you're supposed to be making judgements based on their bio. As a fictional war, your decisions lack punch, and it suffers from tonal issues.







IF I CARRY ON, MY  
CHILD WILL BE KILLED  
BY RAIDERS, OR GET  
SICK AND I WON'T  
HAVE MEDICINE

RELEASED Nov 2014 DEVELOPER 11 bit studios

## This War of Mine – Final Cut

Dealing with the terror of war from a civilian point of view

**T**his is the poster-child for this kind of game, a creation of such reputation that although I own copies on three different formats, I've never played it before. I've never felt up to it.

In a besieged city in a civil war, the population hides out from the snipers in the daylight hours. Come the night, they venture out for supplies or stay home on guard against raiders. It makes you question your ethics and your values. It makes you question everything. Having children in your care is excruciating. The hard choices

you usually make in a household of adults multiply. You've been up all night. You have to upgrade your crafting table, eat and then sleep in the few hours allowed to you. There's no food, so you need to go out again tonight. But your daughter wants to talk. She needs to talk. She's lonely and sad and will only get more so, unless you play with her. Depressed children don't want to play, they only grow worse. So, you don't sleep.

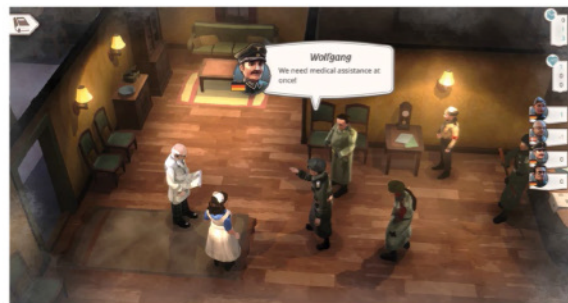
I go to an abandoned property to scavenge only to find it occupied by an old couple. This is their house. These are their things. They are too weak to stop me, but the game is clear – this would be theft. I can't

do it. I'm not willing to trade my humanity for resources. Then, I return home to find raiders have attacked my home, stolen my food and medical supplies, before wounding my daughter. I feel ashamed. I feel conned. Angry.

I want to stop playing this game constantly. If I carry on, my child will be killed by raiders, or get sick and I won't have medicine, or I'll be wounded and leave her all alone. The tension gives me a stomach-ache. Waiting 32 days for the end of a story just makes me think of the siege of Sarajevo, which lasted 1,425 days.

The fact that there are people who have gone through this and are going through this, for real, right now, is even more painful. Approved by the charity War Child, *This War of Mine* is a brilliant game, perfectly crafted. You don't rail at the mechanics, but at the evil that men do. It is an empathy machine, an almost perfect work of art. And if it upsets you... good. That's how things are.





RELEASED Sept 2021 DEVELOPER DON'T NOD

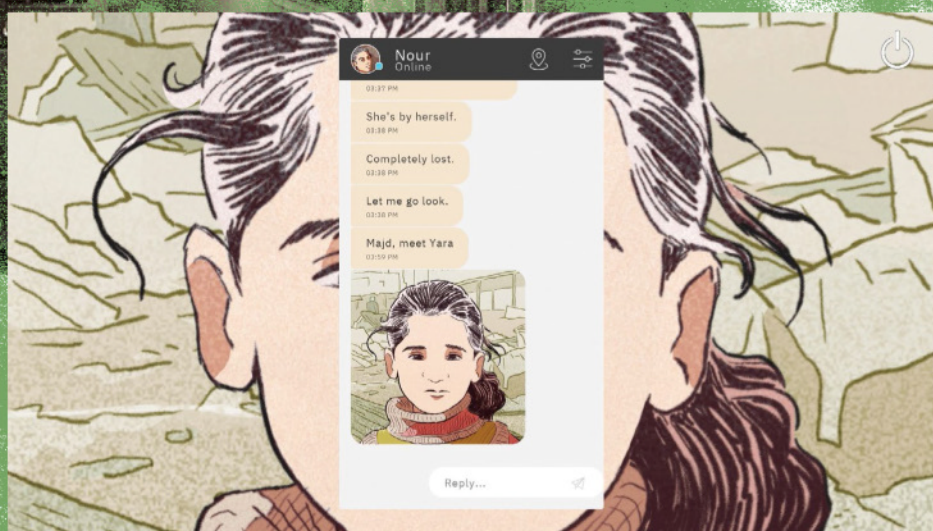
## Gerda: A Flame in Winter

Walking a tightrope in Nazi Germany

**N**arrative RPGs heavy in dialogue choices can live or die by the authenticity and significance of the resulting consequences, but here the most routine decision will come back to bite you. You play as Gerda, a German-Danish nurse in a small, German-occupied Danish town in the dying days of the war. You've a Nazi father and a husband neck-deep in the resistance and you're about to have quite the week.

You're no warrior. Like much of the population, you've just kept your head down, but as the war comes to an end, that isn't an option any more. Every decision you make, from the mundane to the pivotal, affects how others see you, and that can be a dangerous thing, surrounded by those either complicit in the occupation or emboldened by the decline of the Third Reich. It's highly instructive in just how difficult it must have been to tread the line between staying out of trouble and becoming a collaborator, or doing the right thing and getting yourself killed.

Even before my husband is arrested by the Gestapo, I treated a Nazi for burns and now my boss thinks I'm on their side. In doing so I enabled an unpredictable German officer to steal painkillers that we're bound to need down the line. And how far will I go to get Anders released? You can save, but you can't go back without restarting. You have to live with the choices, and enemies, you've made. When you're done, you get to play the DLC as Liva, the Resistance leader, and presumably shoot whoever you want, but I'm assuming that too has a cost.



RELEASED Jan 2019 DEVELOPER PID Games

## Bury Me, My Love

Escaping war-torn Syria

**W**ar drives a great many people over borders to seek shelter, so it would be remiss not to include at least one refugee tale here. Less a game than a visual novel, *Bury Me, My Love* is a series of text conversations between Nour and her partner Majd, as she undertakes the long journey from war-torn Syria to safety.

The dialogue options have been accused of being too mundane, but the sheer ordinariness of the interaction as life and death choices are made is subtly powerful. Even then, I found that subsequent playthroughs making different choices gave me a much more intense experience, so your mileage may vary.

The PC version is less resonant than when played on mobile, whose real-time mode can leave you waiting tense hours for news that Nour is still alive, but these are minor issues in a valuable and emotional piece of work.



RELEASED June 2014 DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montpellier

## Valiant Hearts: The Great War

Surviving on both sides

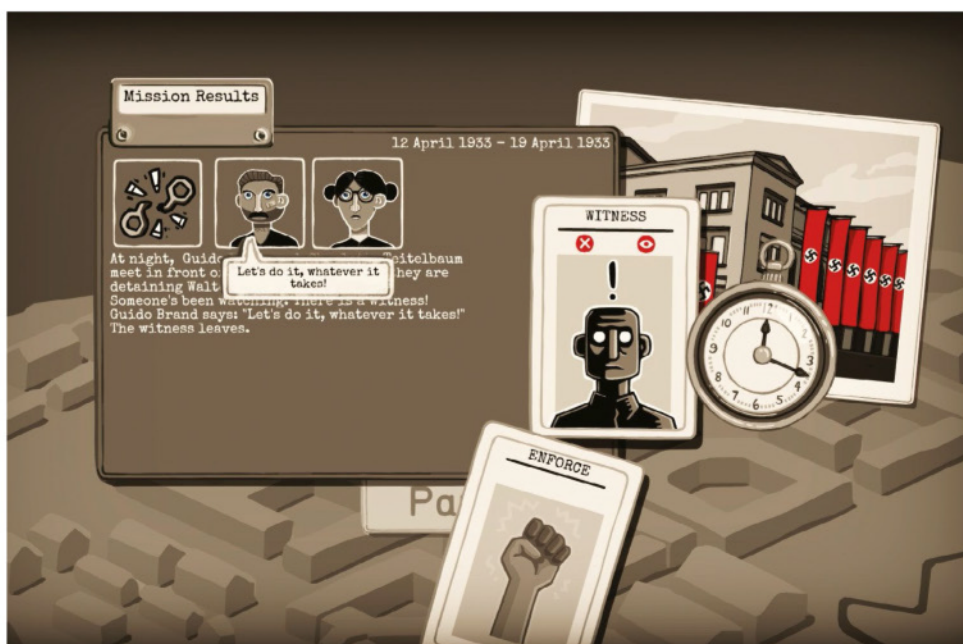
A PLAYABLE HISTORY, WITH A WEALTH OF EXTRA MATERIAL TO LOOK THROUGH

RELEASED Jan 2020 DEVELOPER Paintbucket

## Through The Darkest of Times

Running the Resistance

I'm cheating slightly including this, as it begins in 1933 as Hitler takes power in Germany, but defying tyranny is a wargame staple. Here you play as a Berlin resident trying to run a Resistance cell as the Nazis tighten their grip and grow ever more vicious and terrifying. I muddled through, much as an amateur anarchist might, and you don't have much effect at first. It is insanely difficult to raise funds or support without drawing attention to yourself, and you end up spending all your time and resources busting your team out of jail.

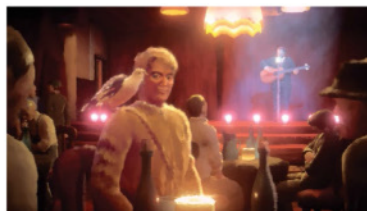




**D**irector Yoan Fanise made two games bookending the centenary of World War I. The first was *Valiant Hearts* for Ubisoft Montpellier in 2014.

Reminiscent of a LucasArts point-and-click, the game is rendered in a cartoon style used by the satirical illustrations of the day, and this level of comic absurdity totally works with the material.

A family is separated and find themselves on opposite sides of the Great War as they suffer its horrors – the trenches, imprisonment, suffering and loss. You do fight, which should exclude this game, but it mostly consists of trying not to die, avoiding shells and gunfire, or clearing obstructions. Its commitment to not killing the enemy just about absolves it. It's a playable history, with a wealth of extra material to look through, provided by the documentary *Apocalypse World War I*.



RELEASED Nov 2018 DEVELOPER DigixArt

## 11-11 Memories Retold

War in a dual narrative

**F**anise then founded DigixArt and, in a collaboration with Aardman Animations, released *11-11 Memories Retold* in 2018. A game with a dual narrative, it

tells the stories of a Canadian war photographer and a grieving German father whose search for his son turns into a quest for revenge.

It's altogether less effective than *Valiant Hearts*, managing to feel worthy to the detriment of the narrative. Furthermore, for all the wonders that Aardman Animations has managed in the past, the art style here is a serious distraction. It's supposed to ape the impressionists but it detracts from both the story and the sense of wonder and dismay that we're supposed to be feeling.

Meanwhile, there's a lot of awkward walking about, basic puzzling and collecting that doesn't need to be there. Finally, the endings feel unfair and contradictory, but maybe that's the point. This is the story of a world gone mad.

RELEASED Sept 2017 DEVELOPER Bohemia

## ARMA 3: Laws of War

Removing mines as an NGO

**T**here are few games that fetishise warfare like *ARMA*, so it was somewhat of a surprise when the *Laws of War* DLC landed in 2017. A laudable effort to touch upon the complexity and consequences of conflict on the landscape and population, it features an NGO tasked with removing mines and unexploded ordnance after the wars on Altis, with a mini-campaign, educational materials and simulations to play through in VR, plus a donation to the real International Committee of the Red Cross in the asking price. Playing at mine clearance does lack a certain spark, and the campaign keeps flashing you back into combat roles, several of which demand you commit war crimes. While the writing is decent, the commentary on warfare is muddled by the fictional nature of the war's history, as is adding cluster munitions to the main game. If you don't play regularly, you'll need to weather the lengthy tutorial scenarios, and you'll have to kill a lot of people to get to the humanitarian bits.







RELEASED TBA 2024 DEVELOPER Hypnotic Ants

## Medic: Pacific War

Step into the shoes of a medic on the front line

**A** game with a launch date and boasting developers with credits on *The Witcher 3* and *Dying Light*, *Medic: Pacific War* is exactly what I was looking for – a full-on, third-person-

not-shooter that marries stealth, action and an active battlefield in a unique challenge. Hypnotic Ants Studio has run a modestly successful Kickstarter campaign, given us a trailer brimming with potential and even a closed playtest.

not-shooter that marries stealth, action and an active battlefield in a unique challenge. Hypnotic Ants Studio has run a modestly successful Kickstarter campaign, given us a trailer brimming with potential and even a closed playtest.

**A THIRD-PERSON-NOT SHOOTER THAT MARRIES STEALTH, ACTION AND AN ACTIVE BATTLEFIELD**



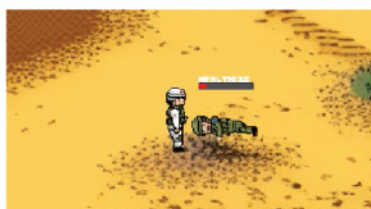
RELEASED May 2018 DEVELOPER Stas Shostak

## Save One More

Help wounded soldiers

**C**ombat medics were often conscientious objectors who went into battle unarmed and in the most perilous circumstances, wherever the fighting was fiercest. Supposedly protected by the Geneva convention, they were frequently fired upon and always at risk. *Save One More* seeks to replicate this with a twitchy and highly stylised arcade game, where you join your squad through battle, zapping them back to life when they're hurt. You're invariably forced to lead the men, which defeats the point a little, and then within two minutes, you see a surrendering enemy shot by a firing squad, who call him a coward.





RELEASED TBA DEVELOPER Gav + Josh

## Combat Medic

Save lives in isometric 2D

**I**n the realm of vapourware, *Combat Medic* is a game that purports to do much the same as *Save One More*, in a retro style, but with a greater complexity of treatment options. It's the work of duo Gavin Halliday and Joshua Fall. There's no release date but we'll keep our fingers crossed.

## CEASEFIRE AND AFTER-ACTION REPORT



I spent most of the time working on this piece concealing the many and various horrors from my curious eight-year-old. Non-violent does not mean nice, at all.

In fact, it usually means considering war as it really is – “humanity hanging from a cross of iron”. I told him that *This War of Mine* had made me sad, and he told me I should stop and play *Wobbledogs* instead. Yet, the sense of reward that comes with some of these games eclipses many high-octane shooters. Finding a can of food AND painkillers AND getting home in one piece has found a place among my favourite videogame

moments. The power of something that feels so consequential cannot be underestimated.

Can you make war that feels that purposeful? We do like creating enemies that you can gun down without troubling your conscience, as in *Wolfenstein*, but that comes with its own issues. Dehumanisation is at the heart of most real war and atrocity. Many Holocaust scholars deplore the disconnection between the cartoon-like Nazis you shoot, and their real crimes.

This is a balance that videogames struggle with, but how do you even begin to make that game? Maybe I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one.







**16**<sup>TM</sup>  
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**INFLEXION**  
GAMES





# NIGHTINGALE

OUT NOW



# REVIEW

## HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

## DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

## EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

## THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

## OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

**00%-09%** Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

**Example** *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

**10%-19%** We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

**Example** *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

**20%-29%** Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

**Examples** *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

**30%-39%** An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

**Examples** *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

**40%-49%** Flawed and disappointing.

**Examples** *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

**50%-59%** Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

**Examples** *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

**60%-69%** There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

**Examples** *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

**70%-79%** A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

**Examples** *Prey, NieR: Automata*

**80%-89%** A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

**Examples** *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

**90%-94%** A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

**Examples** *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

**95%-96%** Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

**Examples** *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

**97%-100%** Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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## Holy hell

We've got a host of great games reviewed this month, including epic versus-fighter *Tekken 8* and superb sci-fi roguelike deckbuilder *Cobalt Core*, but out of them all only one tasks you with stepping into the shoes of someone who's job it is to hunt down heretics.

Yes, *The Inquisitor* isn't our highest scoring game this month, but its dark fantasy setting and story, which is based on the Polish author Jacek Piekara's books, certainly grabs the attention and, as our review shows, largely delivers despite being a bit rough around the edges.

*The Inquisitor's* developer, The Dust, has done great work using – compared to a major studio – distinctly limited resources, and for that a large hat tip is in order.

*R. Jones*

**ROBERT JONES**

**PRINT EDITOR**

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WHAT YOU THINK**

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### THEY'RE BACK

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## This month's heretical reviewers...



**MORGAN PARK**  
Specialist in  
Eating heroes  
**Currently playing**  
*Suicide Squad: Kill  
The Justice League*  
**This month**  
Grew a big dorsal fin,  
considered a rhyming  
name-change.



**MOLLIE TAYLOR**  
Specialist in  
Hanging with Harada  
**Currently playing**  
*Tekken 8*  
**This month**  
Drank piña colodas in  
Harada's Bar with  
Reina. Didn't ask  
Harada for shit.



**ABBIE STONE**  
Specialist in  
Failing to make beds  
**Currently playing**  
*This Bed We Made*  
**This month**  
Realised that, yes,  
making beds is the  
single most boring  
activity on Earth.



**DOMINIC TARASON**  
Specialist in  
Having a heart of gold  
**Currently playing**  
*Like a Dragon:  
Infinite Wealth*  
**This month**  
Wore a series of fruity  
Hawaiian shirts while  
playing mahjong.



**MATT ELLIOTT**  
Specialist in  
Kung-fu diplomacy  
**Currently playing**  
*Total War: Three  
Kingdoms*  
**This month**  
Sent scented love  
letters to his many,  
many paramours.



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# SHOT DEAD

There are flashes of greatness in **SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE**

By Morgan Park

**T**he Justice League was long dead when Rocksteady's quirky looter shooter finally clicked. I was 20 hours in, having just reached max level as Deadshot, discovering that *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League's* endgame hunt for Brainiac is no joke – I was ducking and rolling past walls of lasers and getting the most out of a legendary rifle that penetrates pesky armour. It was a blast because I was finally hitting difficult missions.

It took a long time (far too long) for *Suicide Squad* to show its hand, but once it did, I briefly became the *Destiny* player that I usually can't relate to – eagerly replaying content I've done before, enamoured by the possibility of ultra-rare rewards.

The problem is that, at launch, *Suicide Squad's* endgame is a brief but delicious dessert, and to even get there you have to play a story mode that's not good.

Going into *Suicide Squad* as a fan of Rocksteady's *Batman* trilogy comes with unavoidable whiplash. You'll recognise the studio's unmatched eye for animation in the expressive movements of Task Force X and the silky transitions in and out of cutscenes, but this is Rocksteady's take on a completely

different genre. The carefully curated utility belt of gadgets, puzzlebox dungeons and claustrophobic arenas of the Arkham era have made way for a wide-open, acrobatic shooter that takes place almost entirely outside and mostly in midair.

## All four members of Task Force X have distinct traversal styles

### YOU'LL BELIEVE A SHARK CAN FLY

Movement is the one aspect of *Suicide Squad* that is unreservedly fantastic from minute one. There are no shortage of open-world action games right now,

but few make you feel like an immutable ball of destruction the way this one does. All four members of Task Force X have distinct traversal styles that could satisfy their own games: King Shark is a muscled demigod who can leap entire city

### NEED TO KNOW

#### WHAT IS IT?

A looter shooter from the creators of the *Batman Arkham* trilogy

#### EXPECT TO PAY

£65

#### DEVELOPER

Rocksteady

#### PUBLISHER

Warner Bros Games

#### REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i9-9900KS, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

#### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

#### LINK

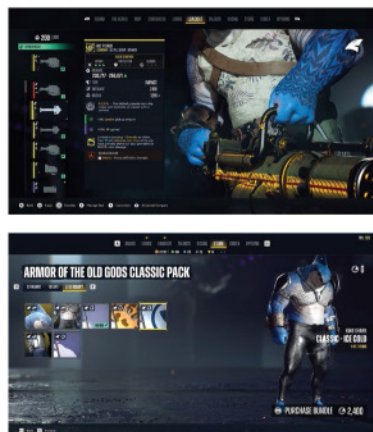
Link  
suicidesquadgame.com

blocks, Captain Boomerang blinks toward his boomerang and speedruns up buildings, Harley Quinn creates grapple points, and Deadshot can fly anywhere in short bursts.

You can pick any of the four and quickly grasp the basics, but my favourite thing about *Suicide Squad's* movement is that it's challenging. Getting a feel for every character's traversal tech is step one, and steps two through five are learning how to conserve air dashes, consistently time slides, bounce off walls to reset cooldowns, and employ these techniques in actual fights.

Good movement skills are baked right into the combat loop – a good half of the enemy pool have a layer of armour that can only be broken by melee or grenades, and most alien grunts hunker behind barriers you can't shoot through. Both encouraged me to stop standing on rooftops picking guys off like I'm playing *Gears of War* and start raining down hell from above.

I respect how *Suicide Squad* prioritises good game feel over realism. Every character has a floaty double jump and air dashes that have zero regard for physics, and



ABOVE: It's a shame this Shark skin is overpriced at \$24, because I do want it.







**TOP:** Rocksteady still has a knack for making modest open worlds look huge.



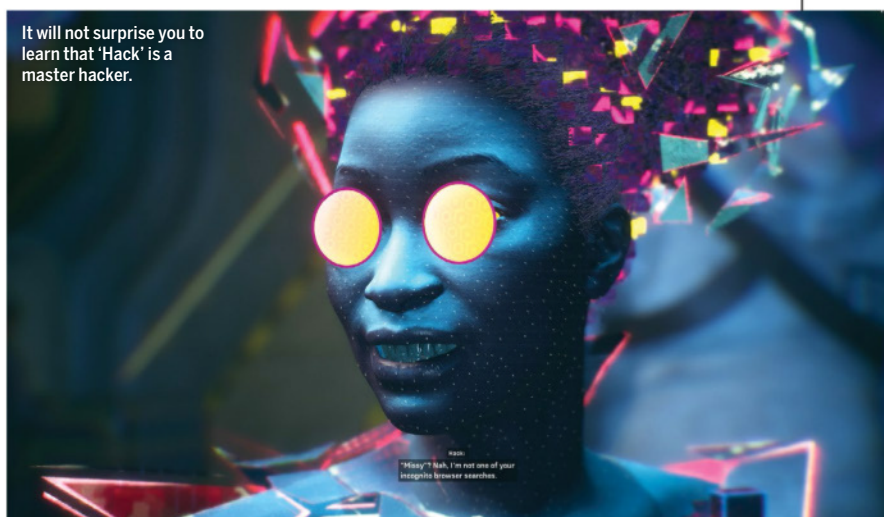
it's great. It's the sort of frictionless, satisfying movement that makes fast travel a non-necessity, and has unfortunately become a rarity in big-budget action games.

## OVERLOAD

It's no surprise Rocksteady nailed movement, but I didn't expect to enjoy shooting in *Suicide Squad* as much as I (eventually) did. There are only five categories of guns (assault rifles, shotguns, SMGs, miniguns, snipers), which is modest for a looter-shooter, but has the benefit of giving each category a distinct role. Miniguns are the best at crowd clearing, for instance, but high recoil and low damage-over-distance make them a terrible matchup against helicopters.

Those roles synergise nicely with the squad, who themselves have specialities that developed as I filled out their skill trees. The majority of the trees are damage buffs and cooldown reductions, but as a nod to the *Arkham* days, those bonuses are tied to thresholds on a combo counter that resets if you don't stay in the action or get shot too much.

It's a neat idea, but between keeping track of the buffs and how they commingle with my gear, I often had trouble remembering which bonuses kicked in at a 30x combo versus a 50x. Thankfully, it takes a lot of punishment to totally break a combo, and all you really need to



## ROLE CALL

*Where did this Suicide Squad come from?*



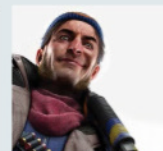
### DEADSHOT

**Real name:** Floyd Lawton  
**First appearance:** Batman #59 (1950)  
Deadshot wasn't always an assassin for hire. In his first brush with Batman, Deadshot pretended to be Gotham's newest superhero, upstaging Batman and Robin while secretly plotting to become a crime boss.



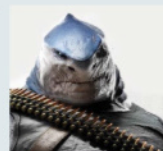
### HARLEY QUINN

**Real name:** Floyd Lawton  
**First appearance:** Batman: The Animated Series (1992)  
Harley is among the most recognisable DC characters today, but I was surprised to learn she's a relatively recent arrival, debuting in the Batman animated series as Joker's lackey.



### CAPTAIN BOOMERANG

**Real name:** George 'Digger' Harkness  
**First appearance:** The Flash #117 (1960)  
Captain Boomerang has a grudge against The Flash in *Kill the Justice League*. He's the son of a toymaker with a gift for crafting boomerangs that can do just about anything he needs at the time.



### KING SHARK

**Real name:** Nanaue  
**First appearance:** Superboy #0 (1994)  
Technically the newest character on the *Suicide Squad* roster, King began as a villain of the week. He later popped up in a run of *Aquaman* and *Supergirl* comics, but his recent depictions in the second movie and game have given him a new spotlight.





know is 'more is better'. My confusion around abilities were part of a larger learning curve problem with *Suicide Squad*. The game throws a lot of details at you early on. In the midst of familiarising yourself with the strange controls, lock-on aiming and the cacophony of health bars, weapon FX and damage numbers, it's easy to miss important aspects of the combat loop.

A lot of my complaints about the early hours of *Suicide Squad* remind me of my early hours with other loot-focused games: weapons are too Common to be interesting, basic enemies die too fast to notice incremental upgrades, and fights get so busy that I can barely tell what's happening. Slowly but surely, though, I learned the difference between a Suicide Strike and Traversal Attack, learned the ways of air battle, and everything started to make more sense – that is, until *Suicide Squad*'s bad story missions got in the way.

**TOP:** In the midst of combat, *Suicide Squad*'s UI can get pretty messy.

**FAR LEFT:** The game doesn't give the squad much time to bond, but the few moments of brevity are fun.

## THE ROCKSTEADY GAP

*Rocksteady sure took its time with Suicide Squad*



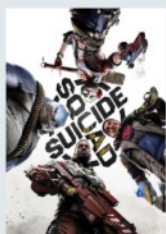
**2009**  
**BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM**  
In a time when superhero games weren't expected to be good, Rocksteady knocked our collective socks off with an inventive stealth action game that leveraged everything cool about Batman.



**2011**  
**BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY**  
Rocksteady's follow up came only two years later. *Arkham City* upped the ante with a small sandbox hub that connected its levels and even let you play as other characters such as Catwoman and Harley Quinn.



**2015**  
**BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT**  
Rocksteady took double the time to bring Batman to a next generation of hardware, a jump that came with a much larger depiction of Gotham City, a huge graphics upgrade, and the Batmobile.



**2024**  
**SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE**  
Rocksteady is back. You have to imagine the journey that resulted with *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* included stops and starts. Hopefully its next thing won't be the same story.

## FIT FOR CRIMINALS

*Suicide Squad*'s combat is a lot of fun in a vacuum, but Rocksteady clearly struggled to contextualise it around a linear story mode. Early on I was immediately invested in the unbelievable odds facing Task Force X: four nobodies dropped into a Metropolis that has already lost the fight against Brainiac, forced to contend with the world's greatest heroes. While a few standout





moments made it fun to watch that story, I never get to play that story.

Every significant narrative beat plays out in a cutscene or off-screen while you, the Suicide Squad, are stuck defending sites A and B, saving civilians, or following a truck. That's not an exaggeration either – nearly every mainline story mission is the same exact handful of missions, with only the location changing. In effect, they come across more like randomly-generated busywork plucked from a weekly to-do list than genuinely authored content.

The lopsided boss fights promised in the game's title are slightly different, but not good. With the exception of one, all of the Justice League fights share the same gimmick of having to avoid their attacks and 'counter shoot' them to make them vulnerable.

The characters talking in your ears often get to do more interesting stuff than you. In one mission, I had to protect vehicle guru Gizmo's makeshift Batmobile while he scanned potential Batcave locations. As I was defending a car from waves of enemies for the billionth time, I imagined a version of this story where we actually go spelunking in the depths of Metropolis and discover a hidden Batcave entrance. It's as if Rocksteady felt trapped by a movement system that only works in an urban jungle, or perhaps didn't have the resources to make bespoke locations for a story

mode that's, ultimately, more a prelude to the 'real' game.

## ENDGAME

That real game being the endgame: a multi-season war against Brainiac set to play out over (at least) the next year. The endgame starts by introducing a new, much harder tier of IncurSION missions that take place on an elseworld version of Metropolis. As you'd expect, Incursions follow the same mould as the rest of the game, but they turn up the heat with *Halo* skull-like modifiers and increasingly difficult mastery tiers. Incursions are where *Suicide Squad* finally got my heart

pumping, forcing me to prioritise the most dangerous baddies on the map and get serious about my shield regeneration.

My reward endgame missions was Notorious gear (*Suicide Squad*'s version of

Exotics) that genuinely shook things up. My King Shark is wearing a Gizmo set that transforms his ground pound into an AOE that freezes everything around him. I appreciate that the endgame grind isn't that much of a grind at all. Incursions only take a few minutes each and the more you crank up the difficulty the more loot you get.

My main gripe is that there are only three incursions and an endless challenge mode I only recently unlocked. That's not a ton of stuff to do over and over, though I don't

think Rocksteady has designed *Suicide Squad* as a game you're meant to play every day.

## BEYOND

The shame is that many players probably never see that stuff having been worn down by a very disappointing campaign, and I don't blame them. I eventually had a really good time with *Suicide Squad*, but it wasn't a nourishing journey.

Even once the loot and missions improved, annoying bugs kept cropping up, like how tutorials reset every time I started a co-op mission, or how civilians sometimes wouldn't spawn to be rescued, so I had to purposefully die or reset the game. One time a sniper spawned so far away that I couldn't possibly reach him, but he could shoot me just fine. I was at least happy with performance though – on my ageing RTX 2080 Super with DLSS on Quality, I hovered around 90-110fps in regular combat with some slowdown when lots of enemies were on screen.

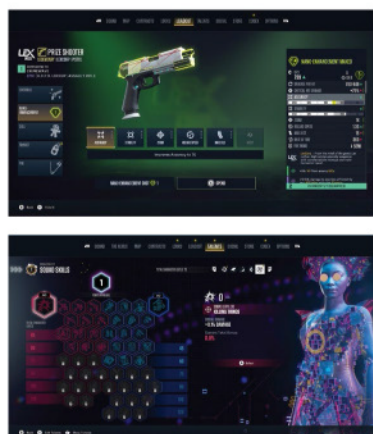
It's a monotonous climb to find momentary flashes of greatness, and that's not an experience I'd drop cash on. But who knows: maybe this time next year *Suicide Squad* will be bigger, refined, and an easier sell for four friends on a bored Friday night. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

I'm optimistic about what *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* can become, but let down by what it is now.

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I appreciate that the endgame grind isn't that much of a grind at all



TOP: A late-game gun upgrade system lets you fine-tune your favourite guns into unstoppable death machines.





# PRINCE OF PAR-SIA

**PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN** suffers from Metroidvania slowness before it shines

By Mollie Taylor

**P**rince of Persia: The Lost Crown is a slow burn to a fault. Its beginning hours are mired by overly simple platforming, not helped by a disjointed narrative that left me with zero investment in its story. If I were reviewing this based on the first 15 hours alone, I would've been a lot more sour. Yet its second half does a fantastic job of leaning into its strengths, and when I rolled credits I couldn't help but wish the entire game had been this way.

It's a solid attempt at a Metroidvania from Ubisoft and one that, all things considered, took me by surprise with how much I came to enjoy it. I've never been one to express much interest in Metroidvanias or even *Prince of Persia* for that manner, but *The Lost Crown* has given me the bug.

## IMMORTAL REIGN

I may not have dabbled in *Prince of Persia* previously, I do at least know that this is the series' first appearance in a long 14 years. It swapped out its 3D perspective to return to its 2D platforming roots, and forgoes its eponymous prince character in favour of new protagonist Sargon. This lad isn't royalty, but rather a member of the Immortals, a group tasked with

protecting the prince Ghassan and keeping Persia safe.

He doesn't do a very good job of the whole protecting thing though, as his mentor snatches Ghassan away to Mount Qaf, where time is all funky and nonlinear, causing some strange behaviour and mysterious characters to crop up all over the place. Sargon jets off with the rest of the Immortals to try and save Ghassan, combating all of Mount Qaf's weirdness.

At least, I'm pretty sure that's the premise of the story. *The Lost Crown*'s narrative is underbaked. Pieces of the overarching story are missing – outside of members of the Immortals, I was often lost as to who people were and their motives.

## Eventually I opted out of paying attention to the story

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A time-bending Metroidvania that marks a new era of *Prince of Persia*

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£45

**DEVELOPER**  
Ubisoft Montpellier

**PUBLISHER**  
Ubisoft

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X,  
32GB RAM, Nvidia  
GeForce RTX 3070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No  
**LINK**  
[store.ubisoft.com/us/  
prince-of-persia-the-  
lost-crown](https://store.ubisoft.com/us/prince-of-persia-the-lost-crown)

Books around the map provide additional lore, but they proved of little help when it came to the moment-to-moment story beats. Grand reveals were met with zero reaction from me because they were delivered so awkwardly with little-to-no buildup that I was unsure why I should even care. Eventually I opted out of paying attention to the story entirely, rather than choosing to be confused by it.

It's a shame because a stronger narrative would've really helped get through the slog of its early hours. When I first arrive at Mount Qaf with Sargon I have a simple jump, slide, and ground dash at my disposal. The game does immediately hint at new abilities down the line by placing a chest well out of my reach, but for the first couple of hours I have to make do with a basic toolkit.

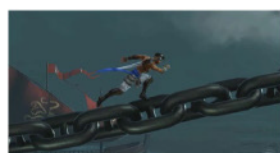
It's all well and good for introducing me to the platforming basics – dash over this gap, wall jump up between these two columns, slide under these dangling spikes – but the training wheels stay on for a little too long. New abilities eventually come in the form of Time Powers, which are handed to me every few hours as



**ABOVE:** Some puzzles require you to shift in and out of dimensions to switch which platforms appear.

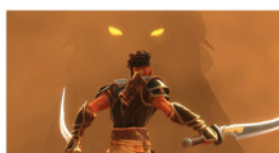






**TOP:** Sidequests are peppered throughout Mount Qaf but failed to captivate me.

**ABOVE:** As Mount Qaf opens up, it offers more visually interesting zones to explore.



I progress through the story. They allow me to do things like airdash, create copies of Sargon to teleport back to, grab objects like bombs, flick between dimensions to make platforms pop in and out of existence, grapple and double jump.

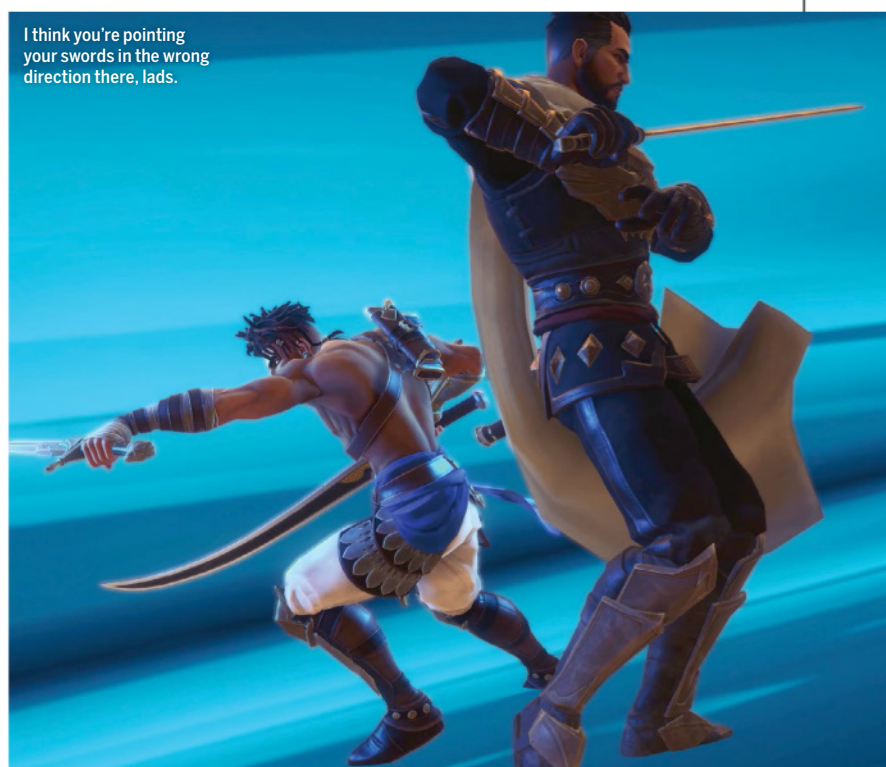
They're handed out a little too slowly for my liking. The airdash, the first Time Power I obtained, came after a couple hours of playing. It doesn't sound like a lot of time, but the lack of such a basic platformer function left me feeling a little held back, which is reflected in the game's early puzzles. I breezed through the early exploration a little too easily – nothing was particularly challenging for the first several hours, even as someone who doesn't dabble in this genre that often.

### NEED MORE TIME

Thankfully, as I collected more Time Powers, Ubisoft was finally able to unleash its platforming creativity. This became especially true as I obtained the double jump ability, which I nabbed around 15 hours into my playthrough. For me, this is when *The Lost Crown* really comes to life. The difficulty spike in puzzles and platforming once I had a double jump in my toolkit was whiplash-inducing.

I went from flying through each area with ease to suddenly hitting wall after wall, whether that be from tight and tricky execution or a puzzle

I think you're pointing your swords in the wrong direction there, lads.



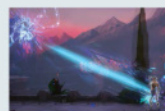
## TIME WARP

*Time Powers give Sargon new ways to traverse Mount Qaf*



### RUSH OF THE SIMURGH

Apparently time has walls, which Sargon can delicately balance on for a wall-run style airdash.



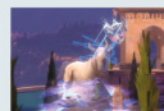
### SHADOW OF THE SIMURGH

Sargon can make a copy of himself and turn back the clock when things go awry. Wish I had this power to undo mistakes.



### DIMENSION CLAW

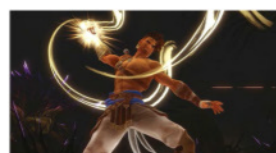
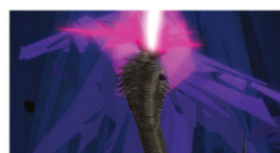
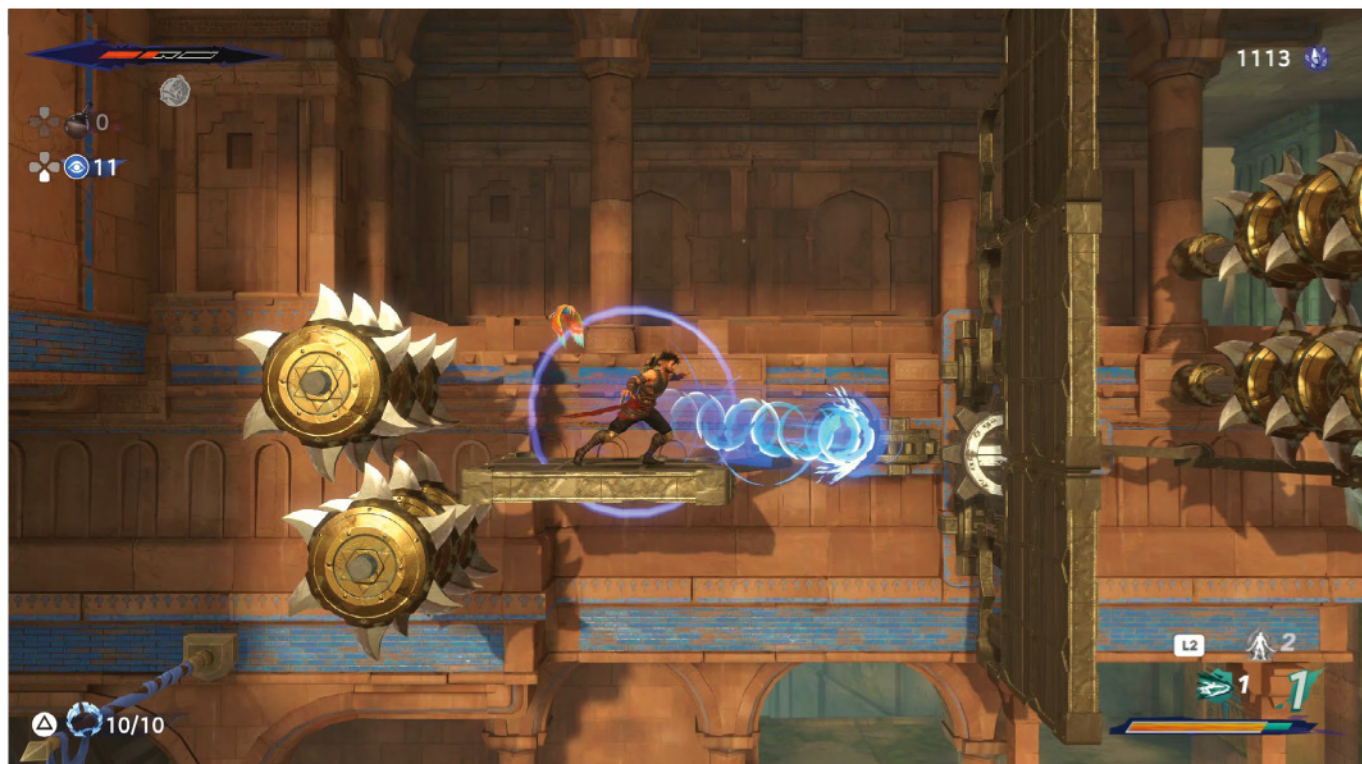
Use this time pocket to grab yourself a bomb! A tiny enemy! A tasty sweet treat! If it can fit in the rift, Sargon can grab it.



### GRAVITY WINGS

I guess time has floors too? Sargon can spring off little crystallised chrono pockets to give himself a second leap into the air.





that left me scratching my head for which powers I needed to be utilising to complete it. Honestly, it was great. The final ten hours of traversing Mount Qaf was *The Lost Crown* at full torque, like playing a totally different game.

To its credit, *The Lost Crown*'s movement and platforming feel fantastic. It's responsive and fluid – every jump, dash and slide is quick and snappy, and controlling Sargon in trickier platforming segments never felt unwieldy. Whenever I failed a particularly challenging section, I didn't feel cheated by the game. Even during sections I repeatedly failed, success didn't seem out of reach, and that went an awful long way to assuage any oncoming frustration whenever I couldn't quite nail a movement.

**TOP:** Some puzzles require nifty use of Sargon's weapons to complete.

**FAR LEFT:** *The Lost Crown*'s visuals are a little rough around the edges, but still look pretty enough.

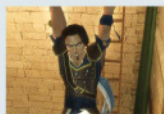
## PRINCE IN REVIEW

*The many faces of Persia's princes over the years*



### PRINCE OF PERSIA 1989

This lad has nothing but a sword and a dream. Oh, and an hour to fulfil said dream before his beloved princess gets murdered.



### PRINCE OF PERSIA: SANDS OF TIME 2003

The most iconic of all Persia's princes. Unfortunately he's about to accidentally unleash a monster-transforming substance.



### PRINCE OF PERSIA 2008

We, uh, don't talk about this one. There are so many things wrong with it I don't even know where to begin. Some things should stay in the past.



### PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN 2023

While all our other princes have been protagonists, here Ghassan serves as a plot point.

## SARGON SPIRIT BOMB

It's not just movement that Time Powers are used for, either. The game heavily encourages you to make use of them in combat, weaving them in with Sargon's standard dual blade and bow-and-arrow attacks. I could use the grappling hook to bring lighter enemies crashing down to the ground or whipping armour off a larger enemy. Sargon's teleportation can be used to snapshot a ready-to-rip charged attack, allowing me to fire one off, return and automatically do another one.



*The Lost Crown's* combat absolutely smacks of fighting games, which is right up my alley. Sargon can juggle enemies in the air, unleash a super move once his meter reaches a certain level or parry enemies to gain the advantage. A standard parry simply puts the ball in Sargon's court, but a special parry indicated by a yellow flash grants a special animation and some huge damage from Sargon. The parry animations are fantastic, colourful as heck and a lot of them feel reminiscent of Dragon Ball Z and other similar anime flavours.

Unfortunately I often found that it was easier to simply mash out the basic attack button and dodge with the occasional parry sprinkled in. It meant I rarely got to see these big setups pay off, and the parry animations were less frequent than I'd like.

Combat was easily the most consistently challenging part of *The Lost Crown* though, and I had a blast figuring out boss battle patterns in particular. I died to bosses more often than anything else in the game, but it also proved to be the most satisfying when I finally figured out the optimal ways to position Sargon, avoid big moves and land in just the right place to swing my swords and deal some big damage.

### UNCROWNING

While I never struggled enough to tweak the difficulty, *The Lost Crown*

offers plenty of options to tailor things for maximum enjoyment. Combat difficulty can be adjusted across standardised options, plus in-depth sliders for a more fine-tuned experience.

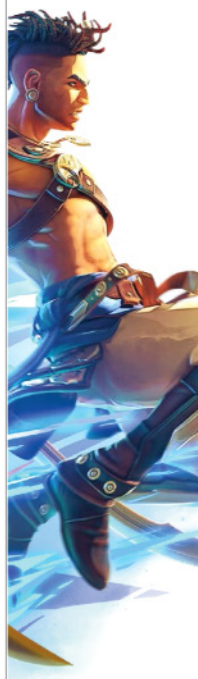
It also offers two difficulties that dictate how hand-holdy the overall experience is. Exploration mode fits more with a traditional Metroidvania experience, while guided mode marks out objectives and blocked paths for quicker and easier navigation. I personally opted for exploration for my entire playthrough, but I was given the option to freely switch between the two at will.

*The Lost Crown* has some neat accessibility features too, like being able to zip past platforming segments that some may have difficulty completing. It's optional, tucked away in a menu and toggleable at any point

throughout the playthrough for those who struggle.

Those aren't the only things Ubisoft has done to make the Metroidvania genre a little more approachable. Easily one of my favourite things about the entire game is the implementation of the Memory Shard system. Whenever I came across something I hadn't seen before, a room I couldn't access yet or something I knew I had to backtrack to later, I could hit a button to take a screenshot and pin it to the location on the map.

**It greatly improved my experience in a way I didn't expect**



It became my saving grace multiple times throughout my playthrough, especially as someone who suffers from chronic goldfish brain. It was a great reminder to future me of what to go back and check. It's balanced in that I only had a limited number I could use, meaning I wasn't able to leave screenshots all over the Qaf. It's something I sincerely hope gets implemented in future Metroidvanias, because it greatly improved my overall experience in a way I didn't expect.

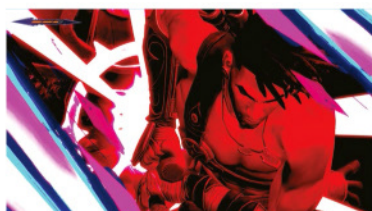
Despite all that, I still can't help but feel somewhat frustrated with how *The Lost Crown* pans out overall. If I hadn't been reviewing it, I'm not sure if I would have persevered through the game's painfully average first half to reach a far more complete and engaging second half. The game never veers into 'bad' territory, but it spends entirely too long milling around in 'adequate' territory. It's a palatable game throughout and, like I said, never became overly frustrating.

If the whole of *The Lost Crown* played like its final few hours and had a more engaging story, I think it would have had a good shot of being regarded as a fantastic Metroidvania. For now, however, it remains a competent one. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

A palatable Metroidvania with a mediocre story, my biggest frustration with it is how long it takes to get to the good stuff.

**72**



ABOVE: Parry animations give *The Lost Crown* a pop of anime-esque colour.





# SLAY THE STARFIGHTER

I've found a new favourite deckbuilder in **COBALT CORE**

By Abbie Stone

**W**ell, I'm doomed. I'm down to one health and there's an incoming attack aimed directly at my ship. Shields? Ha! Buddy, I haven't drawn a shield card in years. I have no movement left, and only one card in my hand will give me more. But it'll also finish overheating my ship, killing me at the end of my turn. Hey, at least I'll be out of the enemy's line of fire so I can enjoy overheating to death in peace and...

Hang on. Didn't I play a buff card several turns ago? One that cost me all my energy and basically got me into this mess? But it makes my main cannon fire every time my ship moves. So if I play this card, set my engines on fire, fly one space to the right, I'll automatically shoot again and destroy their ship first. Eureka!

*Cobalt Core* is full of these triumphant moments. It's a series of wonderfully tense turn-based spaceship standoffs. You've got your little ship, a handful of cards that let you move, fire, shield, and more, plus a limited pool of energy that refreshes every turn. This will all feel familiar to anyone who's lost a lifetime or two to *Slay the Spire*. What sets *Cobalt* apart is the focus on movement.

Each turn you'll see the enemy ship's intentions, which are usually 'shoot you'. You could build up your shields, but wouldn't it be more

satisfying to strike and then dodge before they even know what hit them? One ship can shift to the left or right if you use the leftmost or rightmost card in your hand

## You start with a crew of three, each with unique cards

respectively. Another has large gaps in the hull that you can line up with your opponents attacks so they fire through them harmlessly. It captures the thrill of a dogfight where you're constantly barrel-

rolling in and out of cover brilliantly, despite being entirely turn-based.

You start with a crew of three, each with unique cards and approaches. Finding a trio that works is nearly as fun as hitting 'randomise' and finding success with a group that on paper shouldn't work at all. After each successful battle you get to choose between three new cards. The basic core of shield, dodge and attack is built upon with fireable drones, missiles, debuffs and much more.

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Deckbuilder set in space with ace spaceship duels

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£16.75

**DEVELOPER**  
Rocket Rat Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Brace Yourself Games

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics (Rog Ally)

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[braceyourselfgames.com/cobalt-core](https://braceyourselfgames.com/cobalt-core)

## ELITE ENEMY

After every battle you decide which route you take through the starmap, with each one leading either to a standard battle, a question mark, a chance to heal/upgrade/remove cards, or an elite enemy. Victory against elites is rewarded with an artefact, incredibly helpful talismans that do things like starting your ship off with more shield and movement. I love how you can basically decide the difficulty on the fly. Even when you're on a terrific run where everything is working in harmony, you're only ever a stupid mistake or two from being blown up, which keeps the tension high.

It's a timeloop game, a bit like *Into the Breach*, but a setup so tired it's practically comatose is livened up by a cast who are taking this rather well. These talking animals are enjoying these firefights just as much as you are. They're easy to like thanks to the funny writing. Finally, someone has nicked Groundhog Day's premise and remembered the film was a comedy.

A successful run is rewarded with a flashback to events just before the timeloop. Each character has a trio of memories to unlock, and once you've done that, you're ready to finish the game. There's a few difficulty settings you can crank up, but this doesn't have the absurdly long tail of a *Slay the Spire* or *Monster Train*. Yet. *Cobalt Core* only launched last November, from a dev team of just three people. Who cares if it isn't currently designed to last forever? For a good 40 hours, this is *FTL* meets *Into the Breach* meets *Slay the Spire*. If you don't want to play that, then you're probably reading the wrong magazine. ■

## GUEST STARS

Here's some of the delightful oddballs you'll encounter



**WREN**

Replaces your cards with rarer ones! Not that they'll tell you what the card will be until you agree.



**CLEO**

Helpful healer/upgrader/card remover who is also one of the deadliest optional boss fights.



**SASHA**

Sports-obsessed wolf who challenges you to a game of football against a football-shaped ship.



**SIR RATZO**

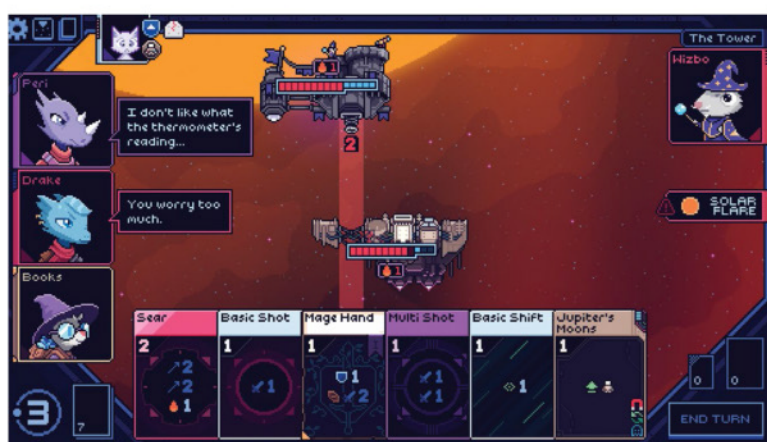
Won't hit your weak points if you don't hit theirs. Woe betide anyone who breaks that agreement.

**PC GAMER** VERDICT

Delightful deckbuilding that uses starship travel to build on the *Slay the Spire* formula instead of merely imitating it.

**87**





**ABOVE:** The football mini-game is sublimely stupid. Why didn't *Starfield* have this?

**FAR LEFT:** Crew banter during battles is fun, and also easily ignored. Perfect.



Lots of enemies love to smacktalk you. Respond by smacking them out of the skies.



# ROUND 8 FIGHT!

**TEKKEN 8** is a blend of nostalgia for fans and a pair of welcoming arms for newbies

By Mollie Taylor

**T**ekken 8 feels like returning home. A bit of a cringe opener, I know, but across my 40 hours spent with this game for this review I couldn't help but feel like I was being reunited with an old friend; a series I adore so dearly. *Tekken* is freakin' back, baby, and I couldn't be happier.

It's a game so rife with nostalgia-inducing moments yet manages to bundle them together into this incredibly approachable, newbie-friendly package. It's a far cry from the bare-bones experience that was its predecessor – *Tekken 8* is truly the next generation of fighters, a bombastic showdown that you should absolutely witness now matter how long it's been since you last peeped into a King of Iron Fist Tournament.

*Tekken 8*'s nostalgic vibes feel deliberate. It's going all-in on its story – called *The Dark Awakens* – building up to a dramatic conclusion to the war between Jin Kazama and Kazuya Mishima.

It's such a fitting culmination, one that genuinely shocked me at how good it actually is. The story mode is fantastically paced, seamlessly

transitioning from cinematics to fights across its numerous chapters. The cutscenes are beautifully animated, going for some huge-ass anime-scale fights, which were rad to watch. Some chapters even diverge from the standard 'cinematic into fight' formula – like one that turns things into an old-school *Tekken*

Force-style brawler – which made sure things never got too monotonous.

Dialogue and translations can be a bit shaky and stiff at times, but it's one of the more cohesive stories *Tekken* has spat out.

*Tekken 8*'s story is filled with little callbacks to previous games and references that long-time fans will absolutely eat up.

Something that definitely made *Tekken 8*'s story mode even more enjoyable for me was its new Special

## Truly the next generation of fighters, a bombastic showdown

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A thrilling 3D fighter with bears, devils and giant robots

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£55

**DEVELOPER**  
Bandai Namco Studios Inc

**PUBLISHER**  
Bandai Namco Entertainment

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Yes

**LINK**  
[shorturl.at/cjuG8](https://shorturl.at/cjuG8)

Style control scheme. Think of it like a condensed, more casual and actiony way to play. Combos are pulled off at the press of a single button, with directional buttons affecting which moves get thrown out.

I'm not super well-versed in every character on the roster, and Special Style made chapters where I was playing unfamiliar fighters so much more fun to play. I didn't feel like a flopping fish trying to frantically figure out strings and combos, and while I think Special Style is a lot more limited compared to similar offerings, it's an amazing starting point for beginners or casuals who want to join the fun.

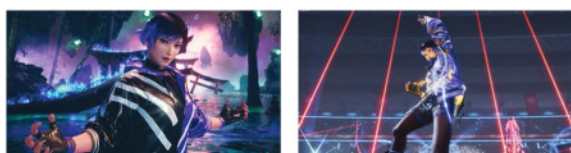
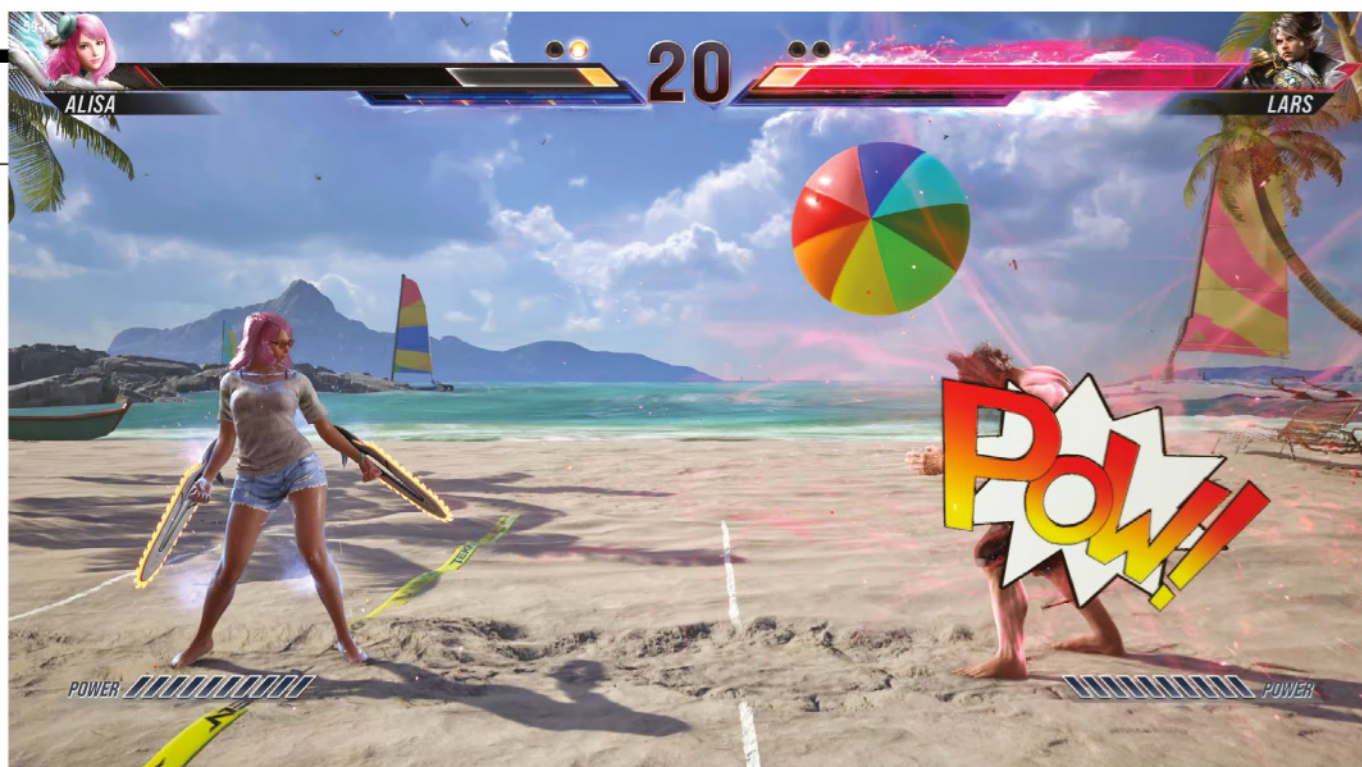
It was a great way for me to get to grips with the new push to aggression with its Heat system, too. I'm fully converted to this new mechanic, which gives players a meter to manage every round. Activating it changes the properties of certain moves and allows for a huge, hard-hitting Heat Smash to be thrown out. I think some veteran players will turn their nose up at Heat at first, but combined with the new addition of chip damage and recoverable health, it's changed the



ABOVE: Who doesn't want to fight near Llamas?







**TOP:** The number of game modes on offer is staggering.

**FAR RIGHT:** Jun Kazama asking her feathered friend to go get the latest issue of PC Gamer magazine.

way I think about each battle. Taking a big chunk of recoverable damage and then using a well-timed combo with Heat to recover it all felt great, and I think players will really start to warm up to it.

### DORYA!

The Dark Awakens isn't the only offline mode *Tekken 8* has to offer, either. Character episodes offer fun 'what if?' endings for its roster, which led me to some belly-laugh moments.

There's even the return of Tekken Ball. I wasn't expecting to love this one as much as I did. It plonks my regular fighters on the beach and, instead of wailing on each other, there's a fun little beach ball to unleash my move list on instead.

Something I would really love to see is Bandai Namco bringing back more classic singleplayer/offline modes for us throughout *Tekken 8*'s lifespan. Survival, Team Battle, Time Attack – it'd be sick to have these modes back to give even further life to the game's offline offerings.

Then there's the brand-new Arcade Quest, which is kind of a second story mode. Except instead of deadly familial war, it's a more grounded narrative about arcade culture that plonks a mini-me avatar among a friend group who just got their hands on *Tekken 8*. It's a far more casual offering than The Dark Awakens, acting as an onboarding process for new players.

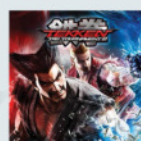


## THE FOUR BEST TEKKEN GAMES OF ALL TIME

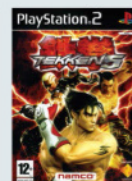
*Play these to get maximum fisticuffs fun*



**TEKKEN 8**  
Listen, it's the new one. I'm biased, okay? It's really good. Play it!



**TEKKEN TAG TOURNAMENT 2**  
The best roster, stages and Snoop has his own arena.



**TEKKEN 5**  
A sick variety of singleplayer modes and a killer soundtrack.



**TEKKEN 3**  
It introduced my boy Eddy Gordo, and for that I'll be forever grateful.

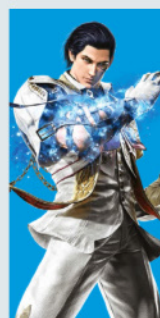




Lili's pet cat, Salt, is a cutie for sure.

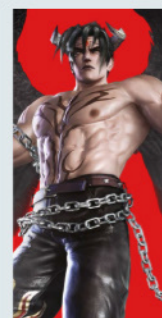
## THREE TEKKEN 8 COMBATANTS TO LOOK OUT FOR

*From the sharpest dressed, to rocking the coolest combos*



### CLAUDIO SERAFINO BEST DRESSED

Who knew being an exorcist required this much drip? I need those shoes on my feet ASAP.



### DEVIL JIN COOLEST COMBOS

His new Mourning Crow stance makes for some bombastic visuals while being juggled to hell.



### REINA BEST NEWCOMER

The hair, the attitude, the purple-yellow electrics – Reina is already a fan-favourite.

It's very short and sweet, not offering a whole lot of substance. The tutorials sprinkled throughout its brief story will be of great help to newbies though.

The story is very sunshine-and-rainbows, which is fine, but wasn't really anything that had me clamouring for more. Easily the best part of Arcade Quest is its Super Ghost Battle mode that's unlocked after some early progression.

### THE NEXT BATTLE

Not only does Super Ghost Battle allow me to challenge NPC ghosts and earn experience to rank-up, and the occasional costume, it also allows

me to train and fight my own ghost and then go on to fight the ghosts of my pals. Fighting my own ghost, being able to see the way I played, the moves I used way too much, the flaws in my game plan and things that ghost me would catch real me out with, proved to be an invaluable learning tool.

I even made use of other players' ghosts during the brief two days the online servers were switched on. If I was getting my ass kicked, I was able to go and look at their ghost and study their moves.

It's not the only neat method Tekken 8 has to level up my fighting game skill, either. Its training mode is

the best the series has ever seen. It's straight-up fantastic, offering combo challenges for every character, explanations of what certain moves do and how you can tweak them to combo them into other moves.

There are a lot of options though, and not all of them are very well explained. I thought for a good while that the game had removed the function to record moves on the training dummy, only to find out that I had to switch the training mode style to Defensive to access that option. It could prove overwhelming to those starting out, but for more veteran players it'll be great for fine-tuning scenario setups.

**TOP:** Visually, Tekken 8 is frequently jaw-dropping.



Even then, there's the absolute game-changing Replays & Tips feature that can do some of that scenario set up for me. It takes recent games against CPU and real people and lets me play them back. It shows both my and the opponent's command history, frame data and offers me tips on how to deal with stuff. It mostly deals with the big things – super unsafe moves that can be easily punished, highs that can be evaded and the correct input to break out of throws.

### ENTER THE FIGHT LOUNGE

I took all of the little tips and tricks I'd picked up while playing my main, Italian exorcist Claudio Serafino, and brought them into online mode. While I can access *Tekken 8*'s online offerings from the main menu, I can also take my Arcade Quest avatar into a social lobby and hop on an actual arcade cabinet, with other players able to walk over and play with me.

I managed to get into a handful of ranked and casual games during the times the server was live. One of my favourite changes is that you can't lose points for your first ten ranks now. It made losing in the lower levels feel less terrible than it used to.

Unfortunately, *Tekken 8*'s netcode is still not quite up to snuff. I played across a variety of regions and connections, including Wi-Fi, and only found stable connections with players who were using Ethernet and

in my region. Almost every Wi-Fi player I encountered I suffered horrible lag with, and even well-connected folk in other regions saw me dropping inputs.

It's better than *Tekken 7*'s, and when it works it's incredibly smooth with only one to two frames of rollback. But it still has a long way to go compared to other fighting games. I was at least hoping for Wi-Fi connections to feel more stable across the board, but unfortunately it doesn't seem to be the case.

It's not *Tekken 8*'s only weakness, either. I had high hopes for this game's customisation, which was touted to have more options and

more freedom. It kind of has the former, as there are a number of categories to choose from, but the options feel incredibly limited.

Bandai Namco has proven it can do considerably better character

customisation with games like *Soulcalibur*, so it's bizarre to me how bad this one is.

### SMOOTH RUNNING

*Tekken 8* has been running beautifully on my rig, for the most part. I've maintained a steady 60fps in battle on Ultra settings, which continued across my well-connected online matches. I did experience some slowdown during character intros, but that would immediately vanish as soon as the round began. The actual gameplay was never impacted.

I also highly value portability when it comes to my fighting games. I get together with my fellow FGC friends quite regularly, which usually requires someone to bring a setup of some kind. I managed to get *Tekken 8* running at a steady 60fps on my Steam Deck with mostly medium settings. It's worth noting that I had to grab GE Proton to get things working, but once I did it was smooth sailing. It's a little crusty looking, sure, but still perfectly readable, which I really appreciate.

It's a good job it runs well on both my desktop and Steam Deck, because *Tekken 8* is a game that won't be leaving my regular rotation for a long time. It's a thrilling experience, easily one of the best entries in the series to date. Its weaknesses can be patched up over time – if Bandai Namco can get its netcode in a better place and make customisation not feel terrible to use, it'll make a fantastic game exceptional.

Whether you've been playing *Tekken* for years, are looking to return after a long absence, or even never touched the series before, *Tekken 8* is the game you should be playing. It's the perfect warm nostalgia hug for fans while doing loads of good stuff to make things approachable for fighting game newbies. I can't wait to dive back in already. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

The best *Tekken* game in years, let down only by its netcode and aged customisation. An absolute must-buy.

89



**TOP:** There are excellent training options to help you learn how to kick ass like a pro.



The place for *Tekken* fights, and dodgy hairdos.



# HOLY HELL

**THE INQUISITOR** is a grim yet strangely gripping dark fantasy adventure

By Robert Jones

**T**here's no doubting the pitch for *The Inquisitor* catches the attention. You play Mordimer Madderdin, a holy inquisitor of the church whose job it is to hunt out heretics and enforce the faith – even if that means a spot of torture. That faith, by the way, comes courtesy of none other than Jesus himself, who in the world of *The Inquisitor* did not die on the cross but instead broke free from it and then went on a bloody rampage across the world.

*The Inquisitor* opens with Mordimer being dispatched by the church to investigate rumours of a vampire operating in the 16th-century town of Koenigstein, where he soon discovers a series of bloody ritualistic murders, as well as strands of a far deeper and more sinister plot. You step off the boat at Koenigstein's dock, and from that point on it's your job to investigate what is happening and who is responsible, with the game's narrative unfolding at a leisurely pace.

*The Inquisitor* really is a relatively slow-paced detective narrative adventure first and foremost. You will engage in plenty of talking in this game. From chatting to notable figures in Koenigstein, such as the mayor and notable merchants, through to interrogating suspects, learning about in-game lore from religious officials, and onto investigating potential leads with the town's nobility, Mordimer is a detective first and fighter second. There's fighting for sure, but it is a small part of a game that's almost closer to a *Broken Sword*: investigative dialogue interspersed with puzzles, rather than an action-adventure of clashing swords and levelling up.

## PRIMARY SUSPECT

If they hadn't been told anything about the game beforehand, I can imagine some being a bit thrown by *The Inquisitor*'s true nature, as on first glance it looks like it should play like CD Project Red's *The Witcher* series. While those games are inescapably an aesthetic influence on *The*

*Inquisitor*'s developer The Dust, the moment-to-moment experience couldn't be more different.

For example, Mordimer sports a suitably gravelly, almost monotone voice. He also has the ability to follow scents in the air while hunting out his targets, which are displayed as glowing red smoke trails. Mordimer also recharges his holy spirit energy, used to perform such scent-

following sleuthing acts, by kneeling and praying at shrines. The inquisitor can also investigate objects, such as a victim's corpse, to discover clues that help him discern the wider truth.

But soon after starting, following an immersive introduction to the

**The Murk is constantly trying to devour your soul**

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

A dark fantasy adventure in which players try to solve crimes and unearth heretics as a holy inquisitor of the church.

### EXPECT TO PAY

£35

### DEVELOPER

The Dust SA

### PUBLISHER

Kalypso Media

### REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 7 5700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3090 Ti

### MULTIPLAYER

No

### LINK

[shorturl.at/bvwmCM](https://shorturl.at/bvwmCM)

game's main systems via an in-game narrative tutorial section, *The Inquisitor* reveals its full hand and character. You're introduced to the basic combat mechanics (light attack, heavy attack, counter) and before long are moving between town areas (Koenigstein is not one seamless city, but a series of districts separated by loading zones), investigating this report of a vampire, eavesdropping on locals for info (while sitting on handily placed benches), questioning targets, detecting clues, solving puzzles, occasionally clashing swords with foes, and pulling on the threads of a wider conspiracy.

Oh, and you're also travelling to a dark shadow spirit realm called the Unworld where a Cthulu-like abomination called The Murk is constantly trying to devour your soul.

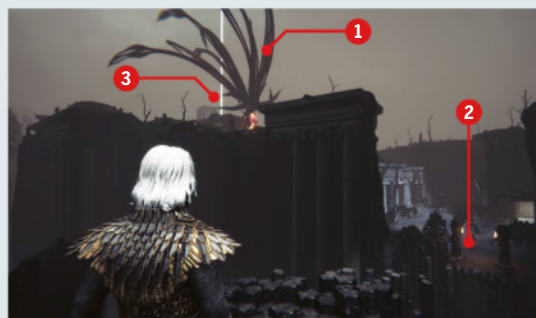
## WELCOME TO UNWORLD

While on the surface world you're playing detective, periodically you need to use Mordimer's unique power (don't ask) to visit the Unworld, a dark and sinister shadow realm that exists on a parallel plane to the real world. In doing this, Mordimer can use what he has learned while detecting on the surface world to locate and then gather fragments of the actual truth from the Unworld, which manifest themselves as glowing orbs within this shadow realm. Each time Mordimer visits the Unworld his job is to gather these orbs which, once fully assembled, unlock a vision of what has happened. This in turn reveals the truth to Mordimer and progresses the plot.

Collecting the orbs isn't just a walk in the park, though. In the Unworld the aforementioned Murk constantly hovers over the land, cruising the skies looking for Mordimer, while wraith-like shadow warriors also roam around the land. Later in the game, there are further dangers, too. Fighting the wraiths allows Mordimer to whip out his

## WELCOME TO THE UNWORLD

*Navigating this hellscape can be tricky*

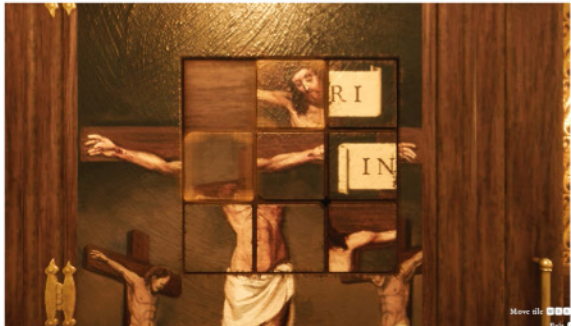


**1 THE MURK**  
This beast will kill you quick if it sees you, so staying hidden to its gaze is key to escape.

**2 SHADE ENEMIES**  
Roaming around the Unworld are numerous tough shadow enemies.

**3 KNOWLEDGE FRAGMENTS**  
Mordimer's mission is to collect fragments which reveal truth to him.





**ABOVE:** Those guys in the background stole Mordimer's copy of PC Gamer magazine.

**LEFT:** By sitting on benches you can eavesdrop on people for clues.



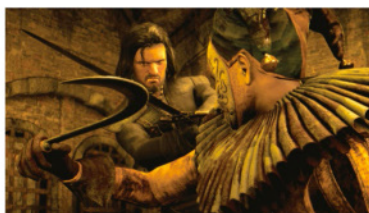
The cathedral's interior shows the church's power and wealth.





**ABOVE:** Roughing up ruffians is part of the an inquisitor's job.

**RIGHT:** Speaking with Koenigstein's inhabitants, such as Liliana, is invaluable.



You know he's the boss as he has a big hat.

Koenigstein's various districts boast unique character.





☞ sword for some duelling action, but The Murk can only be escaped from, with players needing to guide Mordimer to a safe haven of glowing light. Get gazed-upon one too many times by The Murk, and it's game over. The key to Unworld success, then, is stealth.

Luckily, Mordimer has a few tricks up his sleeve for dodging Unworld foes and gathering those orb fragments without being seen. In the Unworld Mordimer can absorb light energy from wells and use it to temporarily ghost through shadow areas that, otherwise, would alert The Murk to the inquisitor's presence. Equally, Mordimer can slow how quickly he is detected by wraith warriors by praying as he passes them and, eventually, even teleport over large distances. Using techniques like these allow the player to gather the orbs and then return them to the Unworld's central island to progress and, once the truth is known, Mordimer returns to the land of the living.

### DELIVERING JUSTICE

Upon learning the truth of what has happened Mordimer will, eventually, have to confront what is essentially a boss character in the world of *The Inquisitor*. Boss confrontations often take place in multiple stages, with each stage leading to a more difficult version of the challenge. So, for example, an early boss sees you playing a deadly game of hide-and-seek, where Mordimer is hunting for the boss but, also, the boss can hunt Mordimer, too. If Mordimer remains in dark areas too long then he's in trouble. Each time Mordimer finds the character, though, the next part of the hide-and-seek game gets a bit harder. Equally, combat encounters with boss characters work the same way, progressing in challenge. One encounter sees you fight a series of brothers, with each being tougher than the last. You get the idea.

Another mechanic The Dust employs a fair bit is the QTE, both in and out of boss encounters. For example, almost as soon as you've entered Koenigstein you find yourself chasing a pickpocket through the town's streets, needing to successfully press buttons at key times to stay on

the thief's tail. While in the aforementioned boss fight there is a quite dramatic chase away from him where timed QTEs are required. Later in the game, there are unfortunately a few insta-death QTE moments, too, such as when having to fight a knife-throwing foe. I've never been a fan of QTEs, and their

inclusion here feels a bit dated, but overall they're not too punishing and didn't detract from the experience too much.

Most of this action, just like much of the game's narrative, is on rails. You are playing

through a singular experience rather than fashioning your own as you go. It's an interactive, plotted adventure and, overall, I feel *The Dust* has done a really good job in crafting it, even if most of it does not offer multiple completion paths (for the record, though, the game does have multiple endings depending on player choices). Narrative and visual atmosphere is one of this game's best qualities, and playing out Mordimer's role in the story is satisfying – and crucially gets more so the more you play. Needless to say, there's far more going on in Koenigstein than initially meets the eye, and uncovering the depths of the plot is interesting, as too is just existing in *The Inquisitor*'s world,

which frequently is pretty, evocative and grounded, even though the visuals can be rough around the edges.

*The Inquisitor* is built in Unity, and you've got to tip your hat to indie studio The Dust for making such a great-looking game in places, but the visuals can be all over the place. It's stunning at times and then really not good the next. It's an odd mix: one moment you're in a detailed, muddy back alley in Koenigstein, with hazy dappled light beautifully illuminating the ramshackle decay of the place, really placing you there and adding to the atmosphere wonderfully. Then the next thing you know, you're talking to an NPC whose neck or body model just looks out of proportion and wrong. Animations vary in quality dramatically too, as do the NPC voices – sometimes I was really impressed with the delivery but at other times it distracted from the fiction, and I was pulled out by a specific character's jarring voice.

Despite the audio-visual discrepancies, *The Inquisitor* ran flawlessly on my machine, with zero crashes or major graphical bugs. The really rather basic minimum system specs required (GeForce GTX 1060 6GB / AMD RX 590) also mean I'm sure basically every other PC gamer is going to have no worries running this game at a playable framerate. I was also impressed with the fact that *The Inquisitor* supports up to 120hz displays and framerates, as well as offering ultrawide monitor support, too. From a technical standpoint, *The Inquisitor* delivers.

### KEEP THE FAITH

*The Inquisitor* does deliver on the concept, which is to carry the player along on a dark fantasy narrative in a unique, twisted world. But that core experience is interspersed with so many 'lite' variants of certain gameplay mechanics we've all played better versions of that they come to dilute and almost detract from it. It would be wrong to crucify the game for that, of course, because if you buy in to the *The Inquisitor*'s vibes and weird world, this is a grim and gripping experience. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

*The Inquisitor* is a grim yet strangely gripping dark fantasy story, memorable if a little rough around the edges.

79

## You are playing a singular experience rather than your own

### TOOLS OF THE INQUISITORIAL TRADE

The gear Mordimer relies on

**1 SWORD**  
From ruffians and hired goons to demonic shadow warriors, Mordimer must clash blades with numerous foes.

**2 POWDER**  
Shersken powder has multiple uses, the foremost of which is healing Mordimer if he takes damage. It can briefly blind enemies, too.

**3 CROSS**  
This proves Mordimer's authority as a holy inquisitor of the church, helping to loosen lips and gain access to secure areas.







"Yes, I'm calling to subscribe to PC Gamer magazine."



**RIGHT:** Well, that's one way to leave a message.

**FAR RIGHT:** As a maid, Sophie has access to roam the hotel in search of clues.



There's a persistent feeling that Sophie could get in big trouble.



# DON'T SLEEP ON THIS ONE

Cleaning up in **THIS BED WE MADE**

By Abbie Stone

**A**t the time of writing, I've never been employed as a space marine, supersoldier, bard, Spider-Man, or most of the jobs that characters in videogames tend to have. But in *This Bed We Made* you play as Sophie, a maid in a 1950s hotel. I have worked as a cleaner in a hotel, so I speak with some authority when I say that Sophie should be fired immediately.

You 'clean' each room by emptying the bins (good), scrubbing the bathtubs (great), placing fresh towels in the bathrooms (lovely), and making the beds by just smoothing out the sheets without even replacing the bedding (prison).

"Nothing like a well-made bed," Sophie even says afterwards.

So if you're looking for an immersive maid sim you'll be disappointed. But if you're looking for a nosy amateur detective adventure where you get to indulge your inner snoop you'll find a great little game here.

Considering how much shady activity they're involved in, the guests of the Clarington hotel are incredibly careless about leaving out incriminating correspondence, detailed records of debts unpaid, and all sorts of juicy puzzle pieces that you slowly slot together to create a picture of the room's occupant. One guest has converted his bathroom into a photography darkroom, and it's hard to focus on giving the tub a good scrub when you notice that several of the photos hanging up are of Sophie. Yikes. Thus begins an investigation into why exactly a guest has taken an interest in you.

The game is told in flashback, framed by Sophie's interrogation by a police detective. You can choose to throw away certain objects and notes you find, which some squares might call 'evidence tampering'.

It's not just the beds you can leave in a bad state either, as it's easy to be careless about covering your tracks when snooping. After so many detective games have let me trample

all over crime scenes consequence-free, it's refreshing to play something that rewards a considerate approach.

It's not always as simple as remembering to clean up after yourself, either. Those creepy photos

you found of yourself?

They're of you snooping through a guest's belongings. It's left up to you whether you destroy these incriminating snaps. Agonising decisions like this keep catching you off your guard in a

game that's adept at juggling tones.

*Disco Elysium* liked to remind you that because you were a cop, you could get away with a lot of strange behaviour. Sophie is a woman working as a maid in the 1950s, so naturally has almost no power at all. The grim imbalance between the sexes and the abuse of authority are constant themes and threats. There's a persistent feeling that you could get yourself into real trouble here, a tension that runs throughout your unauthorised investigation.

**The guests of the Clarington hotel are incredibly careless**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
An amateur detective game where your snooping can get you into trouble

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£21

**DEVELOPER**  
Lowbirth Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Lowbirth Games

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 7 3750H,  
16GB RAM, Nvidia  
GeForce GTX 1660Ti

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No  
**LINK**  
lowbirthgames.com

## SOLVING THE MYSTERY

A few puzzles are introduced, such as a cipher that needs to be cracked, riddles that need to be solved for a locker combination, etc. Fun enough, but the real puzzle is how all the evidence you're gathering fits together. As you discover relationships between the different guests, the initial mystery of why someone was taking photos of you deepens and darkens. I had a blast trying to untangle it.

Its on-screen characters are great too. Beth on the reception desk is the sharp-tongued best friend you always wish you'd had. Fellow colleague Andrew is more of a pushover and a joy to tease. The game captures the tedium and tiny joys of the workplace really well, crucially without ever slipping into being tedious itself.

Sophie herself is mostly terrific company. Easy to like with her compassion for her suffering colleagues and her infectious enthusiasm for a good mystery. I particularly enjoyed how rubbish she is at lying. But she does have an annoying habit of jumping ahead of you. Examine a letter containing a revelation and Sophie reacts with some commentary the very second you inspect it – as in, before you've had a chance to read it yourself. It's a minor issue, but a persistent one.

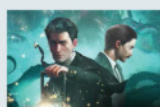
I finished my first playthrough with satisfying answers to a lot of the game's mysteries, but not all, and certainly didn't feel as if justice had been served. When you've finished weeping, remember that a replay of a short experience to see if you can course correct is a far more tantalising prospect. Especially when it's a detective game debut as accomplished as this one. ■

## SUPER SLEUTHS

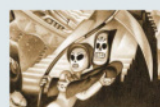
Some of our other favourite detective games



**SHADOWS OF DOUBT**  
Solve crimes as a PI in a procedurally generated world where anyone could have done it.



**SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED**  
A horror detect-'em -up set in the weird world of the Lovecraft myths.



**GRIM FANDANGO**  
OK, so you technically play an undead travel agent, but solving this conspiracy sure is lots of fun.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

A short and sweet amateur detective game that plays like a spiritual successor to the marvellous *Gone Home*.

**82**



# RICH 'N BEEFY

**LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH** is a dizzyingly huge all-you-can-eat Yakuza buffet

By Dominic Tarason

**L**ike A Dragon: Infinite Wealth feels indulgent in a way few games get to be. Enough drama to fill two normal Yakuza games, a Hawaiian city sparkling in the sun and an absurd lineup of minigames including resort management and creature taming. It's impossible to go five minutes without it excitedly thrusting another glossy distraction in your face, even as stakes escalate. Honestly, it's better than most vacations I've been on.

Most of *Infinite Wealth's* issues come and go in the first 15 hours of its sprawling narrative as it tries to introduce a cast of dozens, the city of Yokohama, and give a crash course on current protagonist Ichiban Kasuga, former Yakuza grunt turned 40-something hero with a heart of gold.

As a longtime Yakuza player I felt more than a little bit of déjà vu while *Infinite Wealth* crawled its way through old gameplay mechanics, characters and locations. Despite some strong narrative beats early on, it does take a while for *Infinite Wealth* to 'get good', but I swear it's worth the wait.

## TROPICAL PUNCH

*Like A Dragon's* metamorphosis into an RPG series feels complete here, shedding its *Shenmue*-esque brawler roots in favour of a fast-and-loose turn-based battle system with some timed hits, mashing on some rapid combos for extra damage, or in sync with a big impact for extra damage. Similarly, incoming attacks can be weakened if you tap the block button just before it lands, although enemy animations are often unpredictable enough to make this tricky.

Even with these light action elements, I never found it demanded too much thought on the default difficulty, but that's fine. It captures that familiar messy, loose feel of classic Yakuza combat. That it helps keep fights fast and breezy feels all the more important considering the hundreds (potentially thousands) of street brawls you'll be getting into.

Combat works in a fundamentally similar way to the previous game, but now offers far more fine-grained control over brawls. Enemies no longer get to launch infuriating

opportunity attacks out-of-turn, for starters. Better yet, you're now free to reposition your characters before launching an attack, lining up angles and ideally slamming one street punk through three or four of his

friends, leaving them all in a tangled, always-satisfying mook-pile.

## LARGER THAN LIFE

Even if the combat is straightforward, the characters and the variety of

**It takes a while for Infinite Wealth to 'get good', but it's worth the wait**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
The second turn-based JRPG in the *Like A Dragon*/Yakuza series

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£60

**DEVELOPER**  
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

**PUBLISHER**  
Sega

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i9-13900K, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Local for some minigames

**LINK**  
infinitewealth.sega.com

enemies lend it plenty of colour. Ichiban still possesses a fevered, *Dragon Quest*-tinged imagination, transforming regular street toughs into absurd cartoon stereotypes when encountered. Dockworkers become pirates, belligerent Soundcloud rappers become Kiss-inspired metalheads, and security guards transform into robot enforcers.

The larger-than-life punks present a fun array of targets to be kicked, punched and exploded by Ichiban's new party of pals, including Chitose (a wealthy but street-savvy young heiress who fights with ballet moves) and Eric Tomizawa, a dour cabbie who fights with tyre wrenches, road flares and other improvised tools of the trade. These fun new friends are found in the game's primary city hub, Honolulu; a gorgeous, open Hawaiian city that finally feels large enough to support the game's JRPG ambitions.

But the fighting is just the connective tissue, and the real red meat at the core of any *Yakuza*/*Like A Dragon* game is the storytelling, usually a mixture of gritty crime drama, manly tears and the occasional comic relief side-story. That holds true here too, but on a grander, weirder scale that buckles a little under the weight of its own ambition. Despite its lengthy run-time, *Infinite Wealth* might actually be trying to tell too much story. Or at least, too many of them.

The story here kicks off a few years after Ichiban's last adventure, which led to the dissolution of the two biggest Yakuza organisations in the country. Now he's working at the job centre, and using that role to help those displaced Yakuza reintegrate into society.

In this series good times never last, and through a mixture of a truly disastrous first date (I'm STILL feeling the aftershocks of second-hand embarrassment), a run-in with a muck-raking VTuber and reports that his long-lost mother might still be alive, Ichiban ends up hopping on

## SCHOOL OF ALOHA'D KNOCKS

Meet Ichiban's latest two BFFs



### ERIC TOMIZAWA

**Job:** Cabbie/Yakuza underling. Two jobs, neither glamorous, but he knows these mean streets.

**Fighting style:** Improvised. Is throwing wrenches a martial art? If it works, it works!

**Fun fact:** Knows where every pastry shop in Honolulu is. They're great for finding fares.



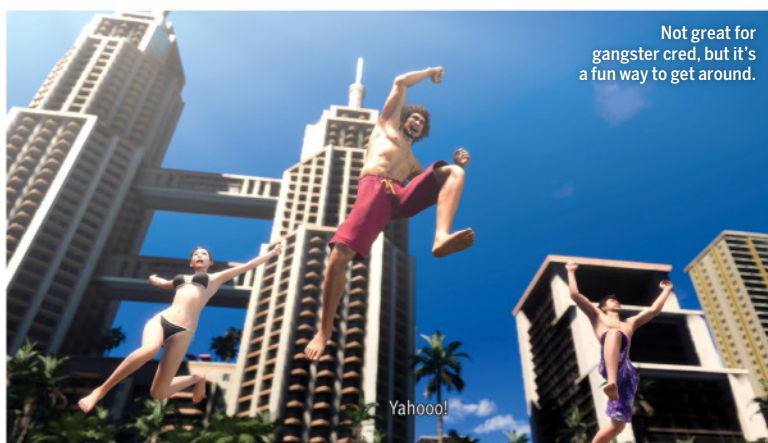
### CHITOSE FUJINOMIYA

**Job:** Heiress/housekeeper. A rich runaway who's now making a humble living below stairs.

**Fighting Style:** Educated feet. A fusion of ballet, tea service and... flower arranging?

**Fun fact:** Watching coffee being brewed is her happy place.





Not great for gangster cred, but it's a fun way to get around.



**ABOVE:** Danny Trejo makes an appearance as machete-wielding mobster Dwight.

**BELOW:** I swear this is a gritty, serious crime drama. Really!







**ABOVE:** There is no creature that Ichiban cannot immediately befriend.

**RIGHT:** What's a tropical getaway without some embarrassing group photos?

**BOTTOM:** Ooof! That's got to hurt.





✶ a plane to Hawaii to become embroiled in yet another criminal conspiracy in need of a beatdown.

One wrinkle is that this is almost equally a story about original *Yakuza* hero Kazuma Kiryu, who Ichiban meets up with not long after arriving. The old dragon thoroughly steals the show whenever he's on screen, which is a lot of the time. Not to play down Ichiban's enthusiastic power-of-friendship schtick, but Kiryu has built up a critical mass of pathos and drama over his decades of street brawling misadventure.

Kiryu's a full-on silver fox now. An aged powerhouse that now has to lean on his friends a little bit more, wrestling with a too-late cancer diagnosis while also (sometimes literally) wrestling with the ghosts of his past, trying to set as much right as possible while ticking good times off his bucket list. It's powerful, emotionally resonant stuff, sometimes standing at odds with Ichiban's more whimsical adventures.

## DOUBLE DRAGON

How does the game handle these two story threads at the same time? By barely even trying. While Kiryu and Kasuga work together in Honolulu for a while, the story eventually has them split up to work alongside full parties of their own, and tell stories better geared to the individual heroes. Ichiban stays in Hawaii's sunny, open streets while Kiryu returns to the cosier roads of Yokohama and a tour through his old stomping ground of Kamurocho. The narrative then bounces between two tonally divergent storylines that sometimes intersect.

This leads to some oddly paced segments, where you'll play through five to six hours of what feels like a dramatic finale for one plot thread, only for it to switch protagonists and begin the buildup to yet another equally lengthy finale for the other protagonist. It almost feels like I was playing two separate *Yakuza* games and tagging between them, with Kiryu's side of the story claiming the lion's share of hype-inducing callbacks to classic *Yakuza*, while Ichiban gets some set pieces that feel straight from his wildest dreams.

Both stories are consistently thrilling despite their divergent tones,

but sitting through more endings than Peter Jackson stuffed into *Return of the King* can lead to fatigue. This juggernaut would be better played over the course of weeks. And there's still so much to do outside of the main plot.

## HAWAIIAN HANGOUTS

Each of the three city hubs is packed with distractions and minigames. There's a fun *Crazy Taxi*-inspired food delivery minigame, plus series standbys like shogi, poker, mahjong and darts, and an

assortment of emulated Sega arcade classics like obscure 3D brawler *SpikeOut*. Karaoke returns, of course, with Kiryu getting to pour his heart out over Baka Mitai once more.

While the side-stories give both heroes plenty of laughs and pathos, Kiryu's tend to hit old fans (like me) harder, featuring chance meetings with young friends who have grown up, old friends in their own twilight years, and grappling with how his world has moved on. While Ichiban's search for his mother can tug on the heartstrings, he does lend himself better to wackier scenarios, including callbacks to past run-ins with rampaging Roombas, serving as comic relief to offset the heavy stuff.

There are plenty of opportunities to grind around town, with Hawaii and Japan each holding a multi-tier procedurally generated dungeon for when you absolutely need some extra

experience and cash. And for the really cash-strapped, there's plenty of additional money-making opportunities stemming from the two 'core' minigames, the Sujimon League and Dondoko Island, which tie back into the main game.

Dondoko Island managed to hold my attention best. A loosely *Animal Crossing*-inspired side game about restoring a garbage-covered island back to a five-star resort, it's bright and breezy fun, and gripped onto the part of my gamer brain that loves seeing numbers spin up exponentially as guests I met in the main city hubs came to visit my increasingly flashy island. Hitting the final goal of a five-star resort took me about eight hours total, providing enough money to financially trivialise most of the rest of the game, plus a powerful attack for Ichiban.

Sujimon League is a creature-battling side game (using the various weirdos that you encounter as 'monsters' in the field) that feels more like a light mobile gacha game than *Pokémon*, right down to ten-pulls of random new fighters threatening your (virtual) bank balance. It's a cute excuse to seek out weird street people to beat up and recruit, but the simple and static battle system didn't do much for me, largely boiling down to having a higher level pack of critter-folk and keeping an eye on their rock-paper-scissors damage types.

Even making a beeline through the main story (with an excursion for a day on Dondoko Island), you'll still be hard pressed to finish *Infinite Wealth* in under 60 hours, and completionists are likely looking at 100 or more to see everything that has to offer – even more if you're willing to splash out for the upgrade to add a New Game+ mode and higher difficulty options.

Personally, as much as I've enjoyed my time on Honolulu's beaches, I can't see myself going for another trip this side of 2025. One serving of *Infinite Wealth* is plenty rich enough for my blood. I've still got enough leftovers from this game to last me well into spring. ■

## VACATION VOCATIONS

*Some of the weird and wonderful alternate classes unlocked by taking holiday tours*



### AQUANAUT

Switching into a wetsuit for combat may take some effort, but the results are undeniable. Lots of powerful area-effect attacks from swinging around that surfboard.



### GEODANCER

Cultural appropriation? Possibly. A powerful practitioner of magical buffs, debuffs and maraca-shaking moves? Definitely. Weaponise those hips!



### ACTION STAR

Can't beat the classics. Bruce Lee's legacy lives on in this jumpsuited martial artist class, featuring powerful nunchaku combos and some flashy throw attacks.



### KUNOICHI

All that sunshine just means the buildings cast long shadows, making Hawaii the perfect training ground for these high-evasion, high-damage dagger-wielding ninjas.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

Stuffed with content and pathos, *Infinite Wealth* delivers a near-excessive amount of urban crime-drama adventure.

80





## GRIMPRESSIVE

Playing hooky with fantasy free-running game **GRIMHOOK**

**T**here's nothing grim about first-person action adventure *Grimhook*: a delightful game about movement, and unleashing mayhem on a horde of cute little robots. Alas, it does take a while to get going – probably too long, considering its brief run time – but, when your move set is fully unlocked and you're free to leap and fling your hook with abandon, this is a game that makes you feel kind of amazing.

*Grimhook* feels a lot like *Titanfall 2*, a game that was surely a massive inspiration. The protagonist has the same 'earnest everyman' quality as Cooper from *TF2*, and while you don't buddy up with a mech, you have a similar relationship with your magical sidekick, who lives in a jewel and bestows your movement powers.

This is a free indie game with fully voiced main characters, and with a movement system almost as polished as its big-budget contemporaries. The voice acting is solid and the pacing is almost at *Titanfall 2* quality. The rub is that there's only one level.

Waking up beside a shipwreck with only a big hook for company, you have to leap around a system of

caves, find your way out, and learn what's happened to the world. After discovering that talking jewel, you find yourself endowed with special powers: you can double jump, spring up from the ground, wall-run and

eventually fire out a grappling hook. In its not-quite-an-hour runtime, *Grimhook* manages to give its move set a good workout, while introducing further wrinkles just as repetition could begin.

**They're a lot of fun to fight, thanks to the varied combat**

### GRIM DAWN

The biggest wrinkle is combat, which I wasn't expecting to make an appearance, as the focus seemed to be purely on the jumping. You can use your hook to bash them and fling them into the air, where you can

### NEED TO KNOW

#### WHAT IS IT?

A first-person platformer with wall-running and grappling

#### EXPECT TO PAY

Free

#### DEVELOPER

Unlimited Fries

#### PUBLISHER

Unlimited Fries

#### REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

#### MULTIPLAYER

No

#### LINK

[bit.ly/grimhook](http://bit.ly/grimhook)

finish them off or use them as a temporary platform. And by 'them' I mean dinky robots, which look they've trundled straight out of cult classic film sequel *Return to Oz*. There isn't much explanation for their presence – there are only snippets of worldbuilding in general – but they're a lot of fun to fight, thanks to the varied combat mechanics and the charming animations as you smash hit them.

The traversal and combat systems are so elaborate that they're surely a test bed for a *Grimhook* sequel, which I would like to explore more exciting surroundings than a dingy cave. It's all a bit samey and lacking in environmental tension, given that you're generally wall-running and jumping just a few feet off the ground. *Grimhook* comes close to *Titanfall 2*, though – an astounding feat for a free indie game. Wall-run over to Steam and check it out. ■

### PC GAMER

### VERDICT

An accomplished slice of free-running platforming and frantic robo-combat, but you'll be left wanting more.

**75**



BELOW: God knows what technical wizardry is going on here.



#### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Free

**DEVELOPER**  
Ollie Powell

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/stretchmancer](http://bit.ly/stretchmancer)

## PUSH AND PULL

The world is your elastic toy in **STRETCHMANCER**

**S**tretchmancer is a puzzle game with an original central mechanic: you can squish or expand the world at ease. Say you need to squeeze through prison bars. Just stretch the room until the gaps are large enough.

As with *Portal*'s titular gun, it's so much fun to just use your power, turning a small room into a lengthy corridor or contracting the walls to bring a distant platform closer. You can push or pull almost any wall in the game as you advance through its small selection of puzzle chambers, and while the puzzles make good use of the power, I feel like we've only been given a glimpse of what's possible, with such an exciting and transformative ability at our disposal.

Leave 'em wanting more, then – but also leave 'em with a huge grin on their faces, as *Stretchmancer*'s

wonderfully silly story plays over the top. As you puzzle your way around the prison, its alien characters interject with funny dialogue and ridiculous plot twists – not at all the sort of thing we've come to expect from first-person puzzlers, which tend to be minimalist and po-faced.

By contrast, there's a defiantly amateur (as in, amateur dramatics) quality to the voice acting, and also the MS Paint-style pixel art, which bring a much-needed sense of silliness and fun back to puzzle games. I'm a stretchmancer, and I'm in prison, and then there's a twist with the character I thought I was playing as – look, just go with it and solve these squishy little puzzles.

Don't discount its puzzling chops, however, as there's a more exciting central idea here than I've found in many 'big' puzzle games. ■

80

## RISE AND FALL

Anger is an energy in lurid brawler **RISING UP**

**I**n the film *Falling Down*, it's a traffic jam that sets Michael Douglas' blue-collar worker off on a violent spree. In the cheekily titled *Rising Up*, it's a malfunctioning printer. When it breaks down in this sidescrolling action game, an office worker loses his rag and goes on a rampage.

If you're familiar with *Streets of Rage*, this plays almost exactly the same. Enemies (as in your co-workers) attack you, and you defeat them to advance across the stage. What stands out here is the pixel art, which realises the heightened, comic violence of the premise with exquisite attention to detail. Take any frame of animation – from the cluttered desks in the background to the chaos happening in the foreground – and you could frame it and hang it on the wall. I particularly

loved watching the main character: the indignation in his little pixel face as he doled out beatings and endured them in return.

It's not a huge game, essentially just one stage, but you would need to replay it to see everything. Little jokes in the background that you might not notice as you're being whomped by a chair, or the bespoke animations as you fight an enemy whose sprite is never seen again. The team behind *Streets of Rage* didn't – and couldn't – put this much work into a single stage, so in terms of pixel art at least, this is a feast.

Mechanically, it's a simpler game than even the first *Streets of Rage*. You can jump, kick and block, and that's it. Combat becomes repetitive, even over the game's short length, with no combos or weapon pickups to add variety. ■

69

BELOW: It's worth taking a few beatings just to watch the enemy animations.



#### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Free

**DEVELOPER**  
Erik H Jørgensen

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/RisingUpGame](http://bit.ly/RisingUpGame)



## THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

The last person you want to sit next you on public transport.



# ICHIBAN APPEAL

Riches to rags in **YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON**

**T**his feels like a weird one to re-review, since *Like A Dragon*, according to my mental timeline, is the 'new' Yakuza game. Except it definitely isn't, and, in the time you've taken to read this, Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio has released at least one spinoff or sequel. But losing years of your life, and, by extension, a global pandemic, is a very *Yakuza* thing.

Perhaps it feels new because it's so different. The *Yakuza* games have always had an interesting approach to reinvention. The series changed from being a focused tale about a single hero to something grandiloquent and sprawling, with multiple protagonists in interlocking tales. But, even then, there was always commonality, whether it was recurring characters, the seedy, neon-drenched streets of Kamurocho, or the fact that the same moves and character models were present in numerous games.

### NANBA AND GRANDAD

*Like A Dragon*, then, is a bold move. For starters, it introduces an irreverent, eccentric cast of entirely new characters. You can still expect

fist-pumping cameos from established *Yakuza* faves, but, for the most part, the protagonists here are all new. This isn't a bad thing, since *Like a Dragon's* core cast of tinned-sake swigging demi-failures are quite refreshing. Most of the characters

### Part of the appeal is the chance to live vicariously

from previous games are reassuringly proficient: Saejima is the strongest; Majima the most unhinged; Akiyama the most fiscally aware. But Ichiban, Nanba, and Adachi feel very much like the *Yakuza* B-team.

It's actually quite fun playing as characters who, at the start of the game, are simply struggling to exist.

The other obvious element is the location. Anyone who's played more than one *Yakuza* game will know the winding alleys of Kamurocho better than their own home town. It's

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
If the Japanese homeless experience was a *Dragon Quest* game

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£55

**DEVELOPER**  
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

**PUBLISHER**  
Sega

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i7-7700,  
16 GB RAM, Nvidia  
GeForce GTX 1070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
store.steampowered.  
com/app/1235140/  
*Yakuza Like a  
Dragon*

possible to get lost in the real-life equivalent, Kabukicho, and find your way back to the main road solely from what you learn in-game. But I actually enjoyed having a new location to explore. Part of the appeal of *Yakuza* games, for me, is the chance to live vicariously. It's not just about piledriving grown men dressed as babies; it's about visiting convenience stores, hearing shop jingles, and trying different whiskeys in smokey bars. So the opportunity to visit a new location – the Isezaki Ijincho district – is a welcome one.

The revised combat, however, doesn't always help with the exploration. It's not that the RPG construction is bad, but more that it breaks up the flow of discovering a new place. There were always goons accosting you in previous games, but it can feel especially turgid here, even if defeating your enemies with weaponised pigeons is adorable. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

A diversion from an established format, that nonetheless keeps most of what we love about *Yakuza*.

77



BELOW: If anything, the heroes in *Three Kingdoms* might be more powerful.



#### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
£45

DEVELOPER  
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER  
Sega

## GUANXI HULK

The kung-fu diplomacy of **TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS**

**T**here's something telling about a game that reduces grand conquest to a series of delicate agreements which often ends in a fist fight. It's been at the heart of most *Total War* games since their inception, but *Three Kingdoms* feels like the most elegant iteration of it.

Compared to the earliest games, it's the difference between sending your paramour a scented love letter in copperplate calligraphy, or armpit-farting the Morse code for 'DTF'. Diplomacy has long been a weak point in the series, often reduced to threats, submission, or open bribery. What was often missing was the option to deal with mutual problems without a longstanding agreement, and with it, a sense of pragmatism and humanity. *Three Kingdoms*, in many ways, solves this problem, with

a nuanced diplomacy system that allows you to form cliques and coalitions, like a high-school drama series where everyone knows martial arts. After thousands of hours spent grinding out attritional victories it's lovely to see functional, thoughtful, often duplicitous systems in place.

This is still a *Total War* game, though, so the culmination of your efforts will still end up on the battlefield, barring any last-minute capitulation from your foes. It's one of many series releases that suffers from comparison to *Total War: Warhammer*'s mix of juddering charges and frenzied monsters. Hero duels make up for this in some respects, offering zoomed-in, cinematic fights that add a sense of heightened drama to each battle. But it never feels as reactive and raw as classic games in the series. ■

75

## JAGRAS ALLIANCE

**MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD:** beasts and how to slay them

**P**erhaps I've been doing this column too long, but I've decided that this month's theme is 'games with a colon in them'. I did try to find a colonic irrigation simulator, but, it doesn't seem to exist.

This is no reflection on *Monster Hunter: World*, which is as far removed from the soapy, medically-dubious removal of faecal matter from the large intestine as it's possible to imagine. The closest it gets is when you accidentally fire your Gunlance up the business end of a Pukei-Pukei; a sentence that will make no sense to anyone who hasn't lost hours to the game. On the face of it, the entire series should be immediately familiar: thrilling, skilful boss fights against a variety of fantastic beasts. In practice, however, there's something alien and unruly

about *Monster Hunter*, which is perhaps why mastering it is so satisfying. Monsters have no health bars, for example, so you have to gauge how close they are to death by analysing their movement. And there's no traditional levelling up system, either. Instead, you repurpose the pieces of butchered fauna you collect, crafting it into armour that will prepare you for the next fight. The fights are often so long there are inevitably moments of slapstick failure. At times, it feels like you're fighting against the game's systems, but in a good way. It's also a game that I've never felt good at, but the world is so strange and beautiful, and the monsters so surprising and varied, that I'm happy to play the role of Gunlance-lugging enema sidekick to the more talented devotees of the series. ■

BELOW: Some monsters feel too cute to kill. But definitely not this one.



#### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
£25

DEVELOPER  
Capcom

PUBLISHER  
Capcom

84





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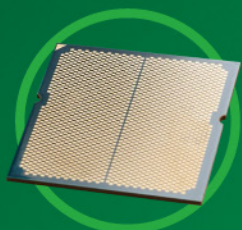
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# HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOU AND YOUR GAMES DESERVE



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## GROUP TEST

Six top AMD and Intel gaming CPUs reviewed.

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## TECH REPORT

How esports professionals saved PC peripherals.

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## TECH TALES

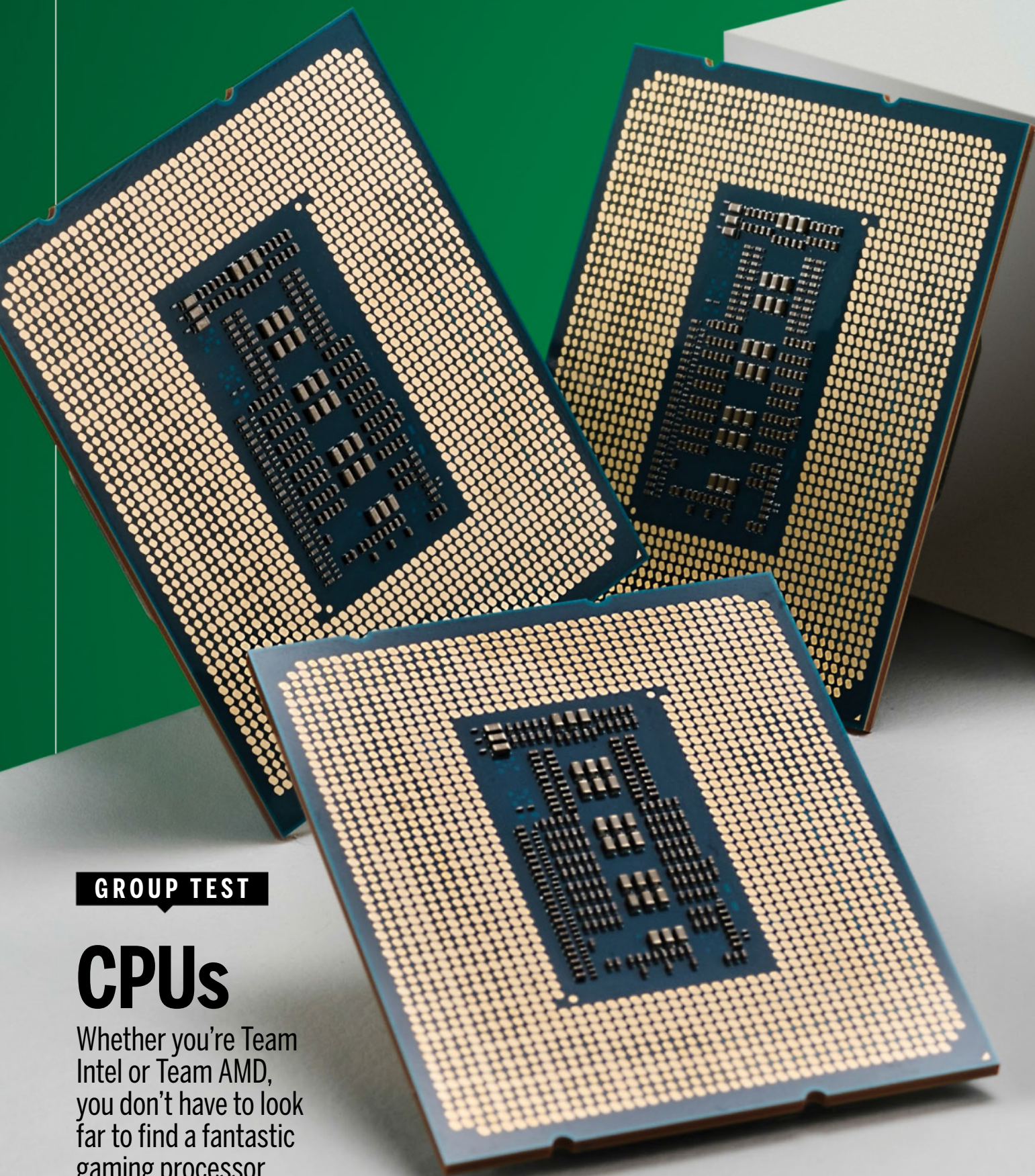
The reality of gaming on a CRT screen in 2024.

**104**

## BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.





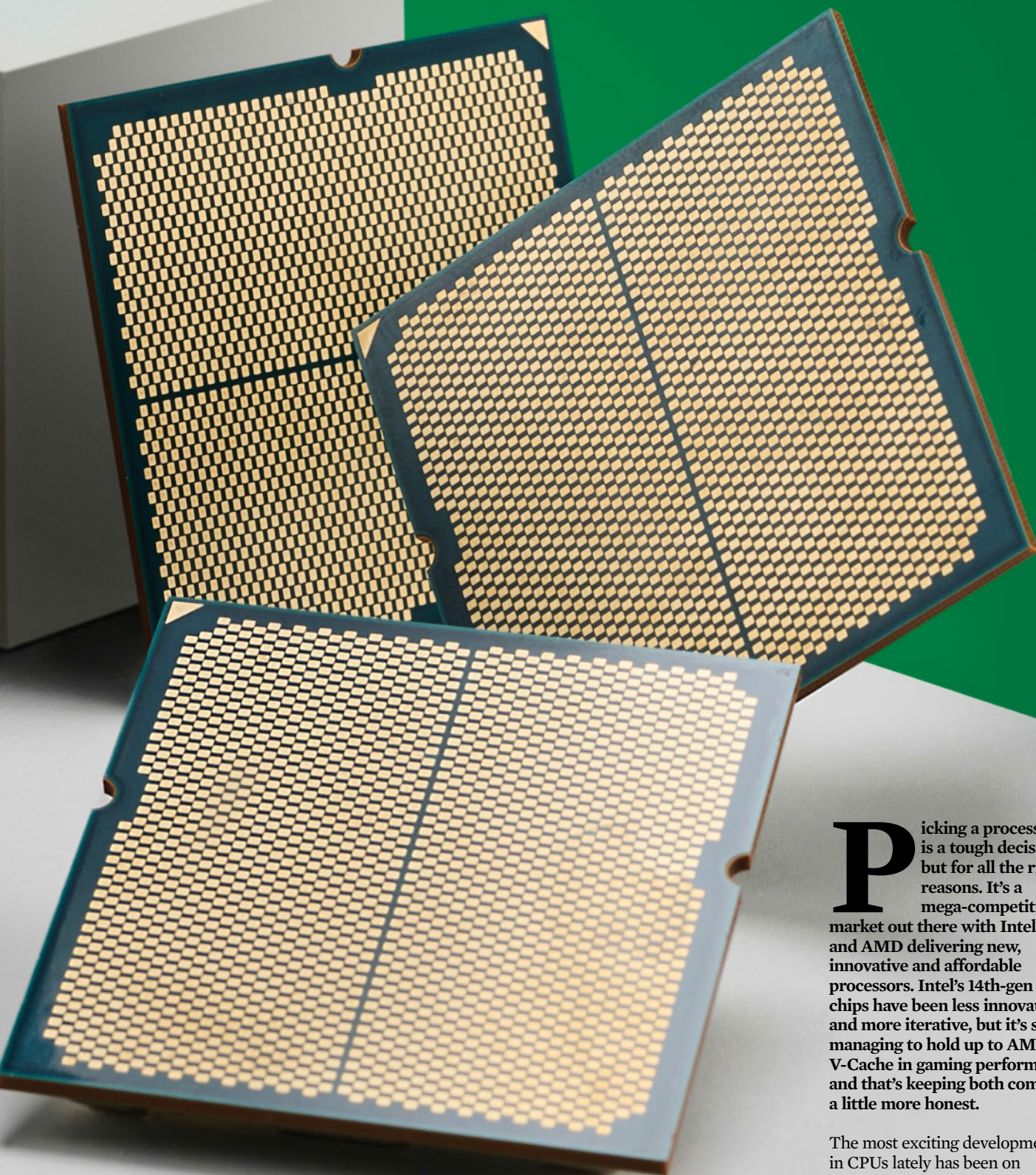
## GROUP TEST

# CPUs

Whether you're Team Intel or Team AMD, you don't have to look far to find a fantastic gaming processor.

*By Jacob Ridley*

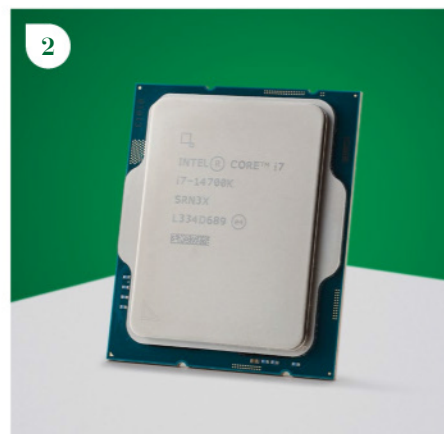




Picking a processor is a tough decision, but for all the right reasons. It's a mega-competitive market out there with Intel and AMD delivering new, innovative and affordable processors. Intel's 14th-gen Core chips have been less innovative and more iterative, but it's still managing to hold up to AMD's 3D V-Cache in gaming performance, and that's keeping both companies a little more honest.

The most exciting development in CPUs lately has been on AMD's side, where you have the breakthrough 3D V-Cache technology. This allows AMD to stick heaps more cache onto its processors, and you know what sort of application adores cache? Games.





## Ryzen 7 7800X3D

AMD £439

### Cache, cache baby

**1** This is the best gaming processor AMD has ever produced. We don't say that lightly, as lately AMD has been on a roll with excellent CPUs. However, this chip is different in one very important way. The key to its success is something called 3D V-Cache. 3D V-Cache is a manufacturing technology that allows AMD to bond an extra 64MB of L3 cache right on top of a CPU's cores. The reason why you might want that extra cache close by to your processor cores is clear when you look at gaming benchmarks. In *F1 2021*, the 7800X3D is 33% faster than the

7700X – both CPUs have the same Zen 4 cores, eight of them apiece, and the 7700X is able to boost quite a bit higher. But it still loses that fight. Not every game will respond quite so well to 3D V-Cache, but generally the 7800X3D is faster than the 7700X. However, the real miracle of V-Cache is in how little power this chip needs. The 7800X3D peaks at just 81W whereas the 7700X gobbles up 143W. This chip is diabolically good.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

→ 3D V-Cache  
→ So efficient  
→ Runs cool

**SPECS** CORES: 8 / THREADS: 16 / ARCHITECTURE: ZEN 4 / L3 CACHE: 96MB / TDP: 120W / SOCKET: AM5

## Core i7 14700K

INTEL £400

### Do it all

**2** If you're building a high-end gaming PC, the 14700K is really all you need. I know you want a Core i9, but consider this: Intel has stuffed four more E-cores onto the 14700K than the previous gen Core i7, meaning it's now only four short of the Core i9. It's practically a match in terms of gaming performance and it's awfully close in multithreaded benchmarks – why spend more?

The 14700K is a genuinely impressive chip, and one of two 14th-gen processors worth buying over its 13th-gen counterpart (the other being the 14700KF). It will happily trade

blows with AMD's Ryzen 7 7800X3D in games and wipes the floor with it in Blender or other applications that favour lots of cores. This fantastic blend of gaming and multithreading is thanks to Intel's hybrid architecture. This chip comes with eight Performance-cores and 12 Efficient-cores, 28 threads in total, which can make short work of most workloads. However this chip's high power draw does push me to AMD.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

→ Multithreaded champ  
→ Great for gaming  
→ Hot and hungry

**SPECS** CORES: 8+12 / THREADS: 28 / ARCHITECTURE: RAPTOR LAKE REFRESH / L3 CACHE: 33MB / MAXIMUM TURBO POWER: 253W / SOCKET: LGA 1700





## GROUP TEST

### Ryzen 9 7950X3D

AMD £600

#### No messing

**3** This is a great chip to show off what 3D V-Cache can do as you can pick this chip up with 3D V-Cache or without. If you're wondering which one is for you, however, it's gotta be the one with extra cache and heaps of gaming performance.

The 7950X3D is demonstrably quicker than the standard 7950X in games. Often it'll trump Intel's top 14th-gen chips, too. Unlike the Ryzen 7 7800X3D, it also absolutely slaps for multithreaded performance thanks to all those Zen 4 cores, yet it's also very efficient. It's absolutely the chip to go for if

you're building a high-end rendering and gaming rig.

So what's the catch? That would be the price. This chip does not come cheap. It makes Intel's top Core i9 look affordable by comparison and is more or less equal to the price of a high-end graphics card. But it is the sort of chip you could stick with for a very long time, and it's definitely one of the best, which makes it a worthy investment for those that can afford it.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tons of threads
- 3D V-Cache boost
- Expensive

**SPECS** CORES: 16 / THREADS: 32 / ARCHITECTURE: ZEN 4 / L3 CACHE: 128MB / TDP: 120W / SOCKET: AM5

### Core i9 14900K

INTEL £560

#### Overkill

**4** Capable of hitting 6GHz and topping the leaderboards for gaming performance, you'd think that I'd be in love with the Core i9 14900K. It's true that this is a very impressive processor, but yet I can't bring myself to recommend it while the Core i9 13900K is going cheaper. The 14900K struggles to deliver anything new. It's marginally faster than its predecessor, though does not deliver significant improvement in games. You may see bigger numbers in benchmarks, but those benchmarks are the only time you're going to feel that

performance boost. The important factor is price. The 14900K is no more expensive than the 13900K was at launch and will make for an almost like-for-like replacement. The tricky bit is that, for the time being, the 13900K remains the cheaper chip as prices have dropped on the last-gen chip. With no real killer features exclusive to the 14th generation, I think your money is better placed on the original.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- One of the best
- Great for high-end rig
- An i7 would do

**SPECS** CORES: 8+16 / THREADS: 32 / ARCHITECTURE: RAPTOR LAKE REFRESH / L3 CACHE: 36MB / MAXIMUM TURBO POWER: 253W / SOCKET: LGA1700





**THIS CHIP IS  
MIGHTY FOR  
ITS ECO MODE**





## HYBRID, CHIPLET, 3D... WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

### Hybrid

You'll hear hybrid bandied around by Intel in relation to its architectures from Alder Lake onwards. The more widely used term is heterogeneous computing, which refers to a chip that's made up of various different kinds of processor core.

### 3D

Chip stacking is all the rage today. This is thanks to new manufacturing technologies that allow companies to build silicon on top of other silicon.

### Chiplet

AMD has been using chiplets since Zen 2, but these are discrete slices of silicon usually sitting next to each other and talking to one another through some form of interconnect. In the very latest chips, chiplet interconnects are used alongside 3D stacked chips to add far more functionality.

## Ryzen 7 7700X

AMD £339

### Eco champ

**5** You could argue the Ryzen 7 7700X is one of the more boring CPUs included in this group test. It has been wholly overshadowed by the 3D V-Cache chips, no doubt about that. But that would overlook the big improvements made to the Zen 4 architecture with this generation. Most of all, this chip is mighty for its Eco Mode. This drops the TDP from 105W to 65W, but you'll barely notice a dent in gaming performance. At worst, with it enabled, you'll see around 95% of the performance, all the while securing lower power draw and lower

temperatures. That means you don't need a massive cooler and have more money in your pocket as a result. If you don't care about saving power, perhaps this isn't the chip for you. It can get shown up by Intel's Core i5s. However, seeing as this 7700X is often found on sale down to within touching distance of the cheaper Ryzen 7 7700, it's certainly worth a look. Perhaps not the best, a good sale puts this chip into contention.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Eco Mode is ace
- Often on sale
- No 3D V-Cache

**SPECS** CORES: 8 / THREADS: 16 / ARCHITECTURE: ZEN 4 / L3 CACHE: 32MB / TDP: 105W / SOCKET: AM5

## Core i5 14600K

INTEL £316

### Barely better

**6** The K-series Core i5s are usually the easiest recommendation from any new Intel generation. Yet being so similar to the Core i5 13600K that came before it, I feel more could've been done to make the 14600K appeal to gamers. The same price as the 13600K at launch, by my calculations you can find the 13600K around 10% cheaper than the newer model. You might think that's not much to pay for the newer chip, but there's so little to gain by spending the extra money. You get marginally higher max turbo frequencies for both P-cores and E-cores, and

that amounts in my game testing to one or two frames per second more, or even none. You don't even gain access to APO, which doesn't support this Core i5 currently. All reasons why I'd just stick to the cheaper Core i5 13600K. It's not only a great gaming chip but it delivers multithreaded performance thanks to eight E-cores and can outpace AMD's similarly priced 7000-series chips. Why mess with a good thing?

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Faster than 13600K
- Doesn't improve much
- More money

**SPECS** CORES: 6+8 / THREADS: 20 / ARCHITECTURE: RAPTOR LAKE REFRESH / L3 CACHE: 24MB / MAXIMUM TURBO POWER: 181W / SOCKET: LGA1700





The unassuming heroes of our time, saving us from useless features.

# PROS AND CONS

How esports professionals saved **PC PERIPHERALS**

**W**e're familiar with the trope by now: a nervous Swedish lad in a flammable-looking black T-shirt with his esports team logo emblazoned across it, arms folded confidently, endorsing a new mouse, keyboard, or gaming chair. Since peripheral manufacturers realised they couldn't use partially dressed women to sell their gear any more, and slogans alone weren't shifting units, they turned to professional gamers. And it worked.

It's healthy to have a bit of cynicism about this sales tactic. In our heart of hearts, we all know that buying PC gaming gear endorsed by the pros doesn't bring us any closer to pro standard any more than cracking an egg into a Hexplate pan makes us Gordon Ramsay. There's something implicitly disingenuous about the whole thing. And yet, esports pros might have saved the peripherals industry. Because although there's been some form of collaboration between pro players and manufacturers for decades, it's only within the last ten years that the power has really laid in the pros' hands.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, esports athletes were used as little more than box art and press release fodder, and by the end of the noughties we were headed in some incredibly silly directions.

It started as a well-meaning push for player customisation. Logitech started that ball rolling with the G5 mouse in 2005, the first customisable mouse to hit the gaming market. The all-conquering Mad Catz RAT followed, which let you dial in your preferred weight, width and length. The tacit message in all of these products was that tailoring peripherals to your desires made you a better player. A completely unproven notion, and one that'd be next to impossible to quantify – but it did at least come with a consumer benefit. Customisable gear allowed for more comfort and convenience.

## PERFECT STORM

The perfect storm hit in 2009, when RGB lighting arrived in mice and keyboards. We first saw it in Roccat's original Kone Pro mouse (hats off to the manufacturer for so many innovations over the years, incidentally). Suddenly our desktops took on a new complexion. Not only could the peripherals that sat on it be customised for function, but now for visual appeal too.

Some elements of that thread have continued into the present day, of course. Gaudy lighting has set up camp right at the centre of PC gaming, and we're so accustomed now to tweaking both the look and feel of our gear that it feels like an egregious omission when we can't customise our mouse's lift-off distance. However, thanks to the pro



## Talking Slang

Gaming peripherals began with the Razer Boomslang in 1999. It wasn't created in collaboration with pros, because there were precious few pros around at the time. It was, however created to cater specifically to a gamer's needs. That meant that instead of a rubber trackball at the base and a PS/2 connection at the end of its cable, there was an optical sensor and a USB connection. There were also, rather famously, a pair of enormous left and right mouse buttons. All the better to frag you with.





**FAR LEFT:** Pro gear like SteelSeries' Rival is wonderfully simple.

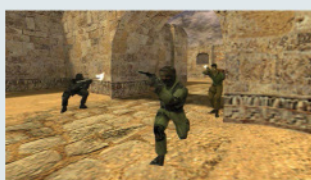
**LEFT:** This lot don't need RGB on everything they touch.

## IMMORTAL PIXELS *Four games that made esports mainstream*



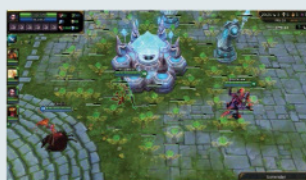
### QUAKE III

A good spectator sport that hosted some lavish tournaments. John Romero put his Ferrari up as a prize in one of them.



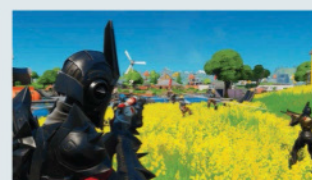
### COUNTER-STRIKE

A more enduring fanbase than the Rolling Stones, and a simple concept with decades of tacticam depth to explore.



### LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Riot's MOBA brought in huge numbers with its F2P model, and led the way for broadcast tournaments.



### FORTNITE

It might not have been originally intended as an esports juggernaut, but that's what it became.

collaboration movement, the features on our products are nearly always useful.

Between 2010 and 2015, esports gathered momentum. Competitive gaming's market size grew from about \$100m to \$500m between 2010 and 2016, fuelled by releases including *Dota 2* and *Overwatch*, and the evergreen appeal of *CS:GO* and *LoL*. *Dota*'s internationals started to hit a million peak concurrent viewers in the 2010s, then kept going. Esports was big enough to change gaming culture, and manufacturers spotted the aspirational dimension to it.

So they started to collaborate with pro players to create new models. These weren't just monitors or keyboards with vague 'endorsements' emblazoned across them – they really did ask pro players for the features that they wanted, and the changes they needed. Then they went away and made new products.

### MARKETING MASTERSTROKE

SteelSeries did this especially well. Its Rival range looked almost confrontationally un-flashy, ditching all the RGB and Batman-like swooping lines we'd all grown accustomed to from 'gamer gear' and instead bringing very simple, functional, reliable peripherals to market. It was a marketing masterstroke – it wouldn't have worked to say it had made a new line of products in collaboration with pro players and then launched new gear that looked the same as it always had. The fact these new mice looked so different made you sit up, pay attention, and say to yourself: 'so that's what pros want'.

Before that happened, we were being sold some very strange benefits. Driver size within gaming headsets was an all-out arms race, and bigger was better. Asus' Strix

Pro headset was so proud of its 60mm drivers that it encased them inside transparent earcups, as though the size of them alone was evidence of superior audio. Keyboards were appearing with extra dials and macro buttons all over them, and a dedicated phone holder too. It was a clear case of marketers telling us what they thought we wanted.

But the pro lines – SteelSeries' Rival, Logitech's G Pro, Razer's Esports Line and the rest – showed us categorically what gamers actually wanted. There was no arguing with the exacting demands of the best pro gamers in the world, and what they all have in common is minimalism. Pro keyboards tend not only to ditch macro banks, they're often also tenkeyless and with minimal media controls. Mice are almost always very simple ambidextrous shapes with simple five-to-seven button layouts and a focus on the

quality of the optical sensor within. Headsets drown out the ambient room noise and give a good stereo spread without drenching the sound in bass like the headsets of yore used to. Even RGB, the flag stuck in the earth of PC gaming, has become more restrained in recent years. It's a big battery drain on wireless devices and you can't see the fancy RGB lighting on a headset while you're wearing it. Ergo: bin the lighting zones.

What might present-day peripherals look like without the pros' intervention? Undoubtedly more fiddly and unnecessarily elaborate. They've saved us from bad gear, and to that we owe them a debt of gratitude. ■

**Phil Iwanik**

## ESPORTS WAS BIG ENOUGH TO CHANGE GAMING CULTURE



# CATHODE TO JOY

The reality of gaming on a **CRT MONITOR** in 2024

**W**hen I was a child I spake as a child,” so it says in the Bible, presumably before the invention of the word ‘spoke’. “But when I became a man, I put away childish things.” It’s true, isn’t it: time passes, new hardware arrives and we box up our former treasures, their VGA leads dangling, pleading with us as we send them up to the loft. We forget about them, sometimes for decades, and then we see a TikTok of someone playing a Windows 95 game, feel an overwhelming urge to do the same, start Googling and realise that the old desktop PC we boxed up and banished in 2001 is worth a grand now on eBay and there’s a whole community of collectors with alerts set up for every possible listing about them.

The monitors accompanying those dusty old machines, though, are a different matter. Their value isn’t purely nostalgic. In fact, there’s a hardcore minority in gaming that swear CRT screens are superior in many ways to modern flat-panel monitors.

There’s a reason they got the boot off our desks in the first place. They took up vast amounts of space, and moving them even an inch required at least three powerlifters and a sweaty afternoon of dedicated effort. They were eye-wateringly expensive, not especially reliable, and repairs were a confusing ordeal. It was like outputting your display onto an aquarium.

What nobody ever called into question, though, was image quality. CRT monitors hold numerous advantages over modern screens, including bright colours, responsive refresh rates and a natural quasi-anti aliasing effect that occurs as a by-product of cathode ray tube technology. While modern

OLED pixels are all individually controlled, CRT pixels are backlit in a way that’s more like shining a torch behind them to produce the image. That means CRT can’t compete with OLED panels for contrast, since the latter can turn individual pixels off to achieve nice inky blacks, but it deals with noisy images and jagged edges beautifully by blurring them.

## LOOKING... CORRECT

The effect is that older games somehow just look ‘right’ on CRT monitors, in a way that our contemporary flat screens can’t replicate. That was certainly this writer’s experience when I finally sourced a 17-inch Packard Bell monitor of the same spec I’d had in 1998, plugged it into my Win98 PC and recognised classic games looking exactly as I remembered them. This is why people pay hundreds of pounds (plus steep shipping costs, these things are heavy remember) on dead tech. The

likes of *Quake*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Grim Fandango* hit your eye looking... correct.

And there’s a good reason for it – developers of the ‘90s used to actively lean into CRT’s limitations to achieve a better image. They knew that if they purposely created noisy textures, they’d appear blurry on CRT screens, so they used them on water and fog effects. They drew textures knowing that the sharp contrasts between colours would be smoothed over by the ruling display tech of the day. And let’s not forget, CRT monitors dominated workstation desks too, so the texture artists were drawing them on the same giant glass boxes that gamers used to play them.

And that’s why things look a bit wrong when you load up an old classic on GOG and run it at 1080p on your 32-inch IPS. The textures were never supposed to appear this sharp. The contrast was never intended to be this severe. There’s nowhere for the hardware limitations of the time to hide, it’s

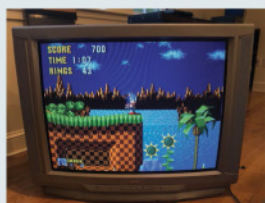
## THERE’S A REASON THEY GOT THE BOOT OFF OUR DESKS IN THE FIRST PLACE

## TUBULAR, DUDE *Four of the best CRT screens ever made*



### SONY TRINITRON

Once ubiquitous in offices and LAN cafés everywhere, Trinitrons were always pin-sharp by CRT standards and featured incredible colour reproduction. If you see one on eBay: buy it.



### JVC D SERIES

Wheeling out a massive old telly to play on is even less practical than retro gaming on a CRT monitor. You get gorgeous colours and richness of image though, and this one’s famed for console gaming.



### SONY PVM BROADCAST MONITOR

Another flavour still of CRT goodness, this time distilling Sony’s Trinitron screen tech into a professional broadcast monitor once used on film sets.



### SONY PVM-4300

A legendary 40-inch model that weighed over 200kg. Like gaming upstairs, do you? Good luck. Still, devotees are always on the hunt for examples of this CRT white whale.



### PHIL IWANIUK

Proud luddite Phil Iwaniuk takes twice as long to submit his articles as our other freelancers. We don’t mind that they’re handwritten, but the wax seals are a bit much.





all just laid bare for you to see, preserved and exhibited unnaturally in a tank full of virtual formaldehyde.

However, there are drawbacks to committing so wholeheartedly to retro PC gaming. If CRT monitors were prone to a breakdown in situ, you can imagine how delicate they've become three decades later, after an extended stay near the Christmas decorations up in the fibreglass-strewn attic and a whistle-stop tour of the UK in the back of a DPD van. Mine likes to turn itself off. I don't know why, and I have no hope of repairing it. My solution is this: when the display abruptly goes black, I turn it off, wait for that de-static sound (you remember the one) and then turn it back on again. And that works, for now. But I dread the day when it won't.

The cold, sad truth is that it's worth stockpiling CRTs, because they will break, and replacement parts are extremely rare. For most people the expense and impracticality just doesn't make the authentic fuzziness and bright colours seem worth it. To the faithful though, going back to flat panels for our retro gaming simply isn't an option. ■

**Phil Iwaniuk**

**ABOVE:** Once hopelessly unfashionable dead tech, CRTs are sought after again.

**RIGHT:** Yours for about two grand, courtesy of some chancer on eBay.





YOUR NEXT PC

# BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



## KEY

### *Budget build*

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

### *Mid-range build*

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

### *Advanced build*

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

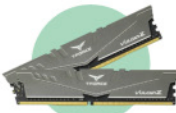
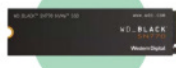


# BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



**TOTAL**  
**£1,050**

|               |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B660M Pro RS</b><br>ASRock <b>£112</b><br>This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.                                            |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i5 13400F</b><br>Intel <b>£199</b><br>Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.                                             |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 4060</b><br>Nvidia <b>£290</b><br>One of the cheaper ways to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support.                                                     |
| COOLER        |    | <b>Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)</b><br>Intel <b>Free</b><br>There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.                                 |
| MEMORY        |    | <b>T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB</b><br>Teamgroup <b>£40</b><br>Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.                                                                                          |
| POWER SUPPLY  |   | <b>Pure Power 12 M 550W</b><br>Be Quiet! <b>£91</b><br>We have to run a 550W PSU for the RTX 4060, as per Nvidia's recommendations.                                                           |
| SSD           |  | <b>WD Black SN770 500GB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£41</b><br>It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.                                  |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b><br>Western Digital <b>£38</b><br>You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder. |
| CASE          |  | <b>Zauron</b><br>Aerocool <b>£32</b><br>This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.                                                       |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>Mobiuz EX240</b><br>BenQ <b>£132</b><br>You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.                           |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>KM250 RGB</b><br>G.Skill <b>£49</b><br>It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely.                           |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G203</b><br>Logitech <b>£24</b><br>A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.                                                                   |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>HS55 Stereo</b><br>Corsair <b>£40</b><br>Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.                                                       |



# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



**TOTAL**  
**£1,553**

|               |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B660M Mortar WiFi</b><br>MSI <b>£177</b><br>This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.                                |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i5 13400F</b><br>Intel <b>£199</b><br>Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.                             |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>RX 7700 XT</b><br>AMD <b>£430</b><br>If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card.                            |
| COOLER        |    | <b>Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)</b><br>Intel <b>Free</b><br>Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while  |
| MEMORY        |    | <b>Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200</b><br>Corsair <b>£36</b><br>With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.                         |
| POWER SUPPLY  |   | <b>Pure Power 12 M 650W</b><br>Be Quiet! <b>£107</b><br>This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity.                                                |
| SSD           |  | <b>WD Black SN770 1TB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£63</b><br>There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.                                                |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b><br>Western Digital <b>£38</b><br>Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space. |
| CASE          |  | <b>H7</b><br>NZXT <b>£100</b><br>It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.                                                    |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>S2722DGM</b><br>Dell <b>£260</b><br>With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.                                       |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>KM250 RGB</b><br>G.Skill <b>£49</b><br>You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.                                     |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>DeathAdder V2</b><br>Razer <b>£47</b><br>Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.                                       |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Blackshark V2</b><br>Razer <b>£85</b><br>The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.                                        |

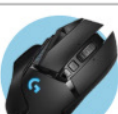


# ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



**TOTAL**  
**£5,393**

|               |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>MEG X670E Ace</b><br>MSI <b>£715</b><br>There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.                                     |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Ryzen 9 7950X3D</b><br>AMD <b>£669</b><br>AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.                                       |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 4090</b><br>Nvidia <b>£1,500</b><br>The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.                                             |
| COOLER        |    | <b>Kraken X63</b><br>NZXT <b>£155</b><br>One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.                    |
| MEMORY        |    | <b>Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB)</b><br>G.Skill <b>£118</b><br>This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.                                |
| POWER SUPPLY  |   | <b>Prime TX-1000</b><br>Seasonic <b>£340</b><br>An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.                                       |
| BOOT DRIVE    |  | <b>WD Black SN850X 2TB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£110</b><br>You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive. |
| DATA DRIVE    |  | <b>NM790 4TB</b><br>Lexar <b>£189</b><br>With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.                                   |
| CASE          |  | <b>5000D</b><br>Corsair <b>£140</b><br>We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.                                                              |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF)</b><br>Alienware <b>£929</b><br>You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.                                |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>ROG Azoth</b><br>Asus <b>£250</b><br>This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.                                       |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G502 Lightspeed</b><br>Logitech <b>£120</b><br>With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.                  |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Arctis 7 Wireless</b><br>SteelSeries <b>£158</b><br>If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.                               |



# EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



## “You pour rookies in one end and badasses emerge from the other”

Having a chill time watching the occasional noob die in **XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN**

**T**he Firaxis formula has been copied but never bettered. It's the little things, like the way the camera swoops in when you're aiming or the last squaddie hustles into cover at the end of a turn. I feel more connected to my guys if the sensation of being an invisible giant playing soldiers gets broken every now and then.

Instead of replaying *XCOM 2* for the Nth time, maybe with a mod that makes everyone look like Sisters of Battle, I decided to go back to the previous *XCOM*. I wanted to remind myself what had changed. *XCOM 2* can be overwhelming, it's a flood of mission types and mechanics, so I thought hopping back a few years would be a return to some kind of purity – just me and my four-to-six knock-off GI Joes with pockets so

**JODY MACGREGOR**



**THIS MONTH**  
Relaxing in *XCOM: Relaunch*.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Sovereign Syndicate*,  
*Warhammer: Vermintide II*

small they can only carry one grenade apiece. But add-on DLC had already jam-packed *XCOM* with extras. You're turning soldiers into MEC troopers or upgrading their DNA while also building a Foundry to construct a different flavour of robots and upgrades, and then adding psychic powers on top. There's a messy redundancy in the way you can research a suit of armour that comes with a grappling hook to help your snipers get on rooftops, but can also upgrade their legs so they can just jump up there.

**TOP:** Slingshot added a named NPC who was immediately cooler than anyone you know.

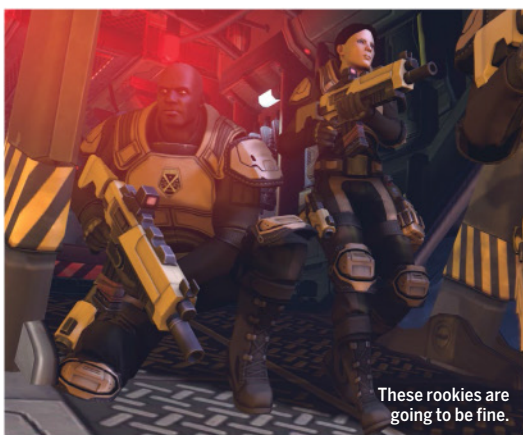
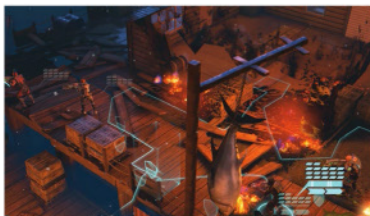
I don't mind, though. It may not have the mythical purity I remember, but it's still a lot of fun to turn a squad of rank amateurs into the A-Team. *XCOM* is basically a big funnel: you pour rookies in one end and badasses emerge from the other. I'll never stop enjoying that.

### WE WILL BE WATCHING

These days I'm dropping the difficulty to Normal, which is like removing the hidden blades inside the funnel. I know the internet's sold on 'Iron Man or GTFO' but when I return to *XCOM* it's for comfort food. If a sectoid in metal pants gets lucky

**YOU'RE TURNING SOLDIERS INTO MEC TROOPERS OR UPGRADING THEIR DNA**



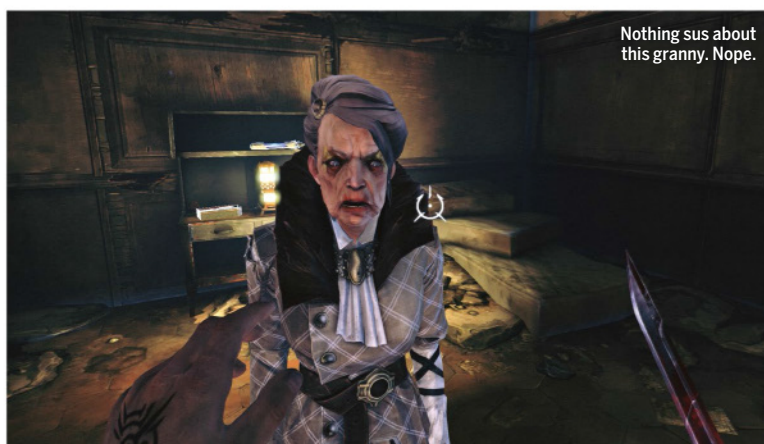


These rookies are going to be fine.

and kills a veteran I don't want it to be the end of the line. The safe playstyle that forces you into, all full-cover overwatch and alpha strikes, bores me to tears.

Revisiting this version, which I'm carefully not calling 'the original' so I don't get emails from people who think I don't know about *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, means I get to replay some of my favourite levels. Like the one where you work through a train carriage by carriage, or fight across the top of a battleship in midair. The best is still the fishing village in Newfoundland where chryssalids hatch out of big fish and you have to call in an air-strike then hustle back to the extraction point before the bombs fall, leaving at the absolute last moment.

*XCOM 2* is definitely better, though. In this predecessor I've found myself unable to select a rooftop square I want to move to because it keeps highlighting one on the floor below, and I sure do miss the variety of mods and cosmetics *XCOM 2* has. That's where I'll end up next time the turn-based tactics itch needs to be scratched – maybe with mods that make everyone look like they're from *Ghost in the Shell* or *Mass Effect*. ■



Nothing sus about this granny. Nope.

## “The temptation to slit throats is high”

Being a merciful ghost in **DISHONORED**

▶ ROBERT JONES



**THIS MONTH**  
Had an emo-off  
with the Outsider.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*The Inquisitor*,  
*League of Legends*

**A** twitchy old granny, wandering aimlessly around an abandoned house, stares me in the eye and asks me ever so sweetly to deal with her gentleman callers, three armed goons who are battering on the home's locked front door and demanding entry. Help her, and she'll give me an item of power.

Power in *Dishonored* comes in the form of otherworldly abilities as granted through whalebone runes by the mysterious and sinister emo lord, the Outsider. This guy, who looks like a reject from My Chemical Romance, has empowered me with a range of superhuman powers that, being honest, are mainly geared around killing foes in a bloody, brutal manner. The temptation to slit throats is high.

But the beauty of *Dishonored*, and indeed why the game has so much replayability, is that you don't have to use these powers and, even if you do, you certainly don't have to use them to kill your enemies. Indeed, how you use your powers has a direct affect on the game. For this run, I'm trying to not kill anyone

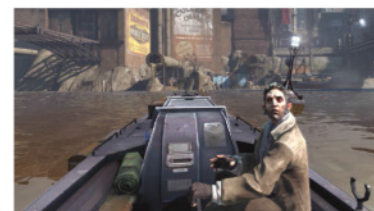
other than my main assassination target each mission.

### GHOSTLY FUN

It's going to be even harder, too, as I'm trying to complete each mission with the 'Ghost' accomplishment, something you get for not being seen by any hostiles as you carry out your mission. Better get to it.

I call on the Outsider's power of Blink, a force that lets me teleport between locations, to materialise behind the goons on a raised gantry. My normal non-lethal attack of choice is the chokeout from behind, but that's not going to work here. There's too many of them in one spot, and I'll be seen and cut to ribbons.

So instead I make use of my crossbow with tranquilliser darts. I lean out from the gantry and shoot one goon in the arse. He yelps, but then immediately falls over unconscious. I duck to the other side of the gantry and shoot the second goon in the crotch, still without being unseen. The final goon is now on high alert, and searching for me desperately, but I teleport behind him and choke him out. What a merciful ghost I am. ■





# “You’re a prototype Big Daddy on the hunt for his lost Little Sister, Eleanor”

**BIOSHOCK 2** is almost forgotten, but it doesn’t deserve to be

**B**ioShock 2 is the *Shock* that time forgot. Nestled between its beloved big brother and infinite discourse generator little si... ah, sibling, it’s a game that seemed to vanish as soon as it appeared when it released all the way back in 2010.

So, naturally, with *Cyberpunk* and *Elden Ring* loaded up and ready to go on the brand new Steam Deck I brought home for Christmas, I spent the entire time playing this instead.

## SYSTEMIC RISK

Why is it so forgotten? Well, for one, Sofia Lamb – the game’s main villain and, as endless audio logs inform you, a figure of apparently immense presence on Rapture’s political stage who somehow never merited a mention in *BioShock 1* – just doesn’t have Andrew Ryan’s swagger. She’s part of the game’s desire to do *System Shock 2* again: replacing Ryan’s paranoid objectivism with collectivism in the same way *System Shock* swapped out the singular SHODAN for the hivemind of The Many.

## ▶ JOSHUA WOLENS



**THIS MONTH**  
Used a drill how you’re not supposed to.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Marvel’s Midnight Suns*

But *System Shock 2* was smart enough to keep SHODAN along for the ride anyway, while Ryan’s ghost only lingers in *BioShock 2* through audio logs and the decayed remains of his cult of personality. Lamb and her quasi-religious collectivism just can’t fill the void he leaves behind.

And yet I spent a solid week and a bit playing the thing to completion. Why? Because *BioShock 2* is a dark horse. Get away from the ideology stuff that can’t be as interesting as the first game or as baffling as the third, and there’s plenty to like in Rapture’s second outing.

## LETS YOU WIELD YOUR PLASMID ABILITIES AND WEAPONS SIMULTANEOUSLY

Part of that is tweaked gameplay. *BioShock 2* was the first game in the series to let you wield your plasmid abilities and weapons simultaneously.

But also, I think this might be the ur-Dad Game, that genre of *Witchers* and *Gods of War* and the like that ended up defining the last decade of big-budget videogames. You’re a prototype Big Daddy on the hunt for his lost Little Sister, Eleanor.

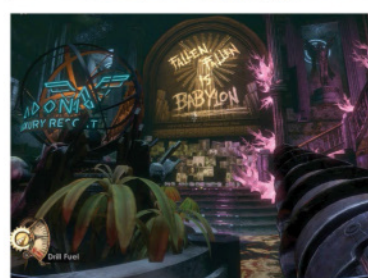
Eleanor is imprisoned by Lamb, her mother, who has a plot to build communism by injecting her daughter with all the memories of Rapture’s citizens via weird science.

It’s strangely familiar, and the game pulls it off in a way it doesn’t manage with the big-picture stuff. Piecing together the circumstances of Eleanor’s childhood, her neglectful mother and the way she latched onto a father figure in the form of, well, a Big Daddy, makes me feel like I’m playing some kind of magic lantern version of *The Last of Us*, right down to the whole thing really being Eleanor’s/Ellie’s story rather than Subject Delta’s/Joel’s. I think this seabed fossil might be a 21st century missing link, and one that’s worth remembering, too. ■



**FAR LEFT:** Look, pa! Two hands!

**LEFT:** At least I’ll always have you, deals clown.







# “Linking perks to personality makes all that stuff you can buy make sense”

A game of two halves, or more, in **EA FC 24**

**T**his game drives me to drink. It's a basic Pavlovian response. I started playing *FIFA 20* in the darkest days of lockdown, when there was no football, while waiting for my five-year-old to finally fall asleep, knowing that I'd have to try to home-school him in the morning and that tomorrow would be the same as today, and every day for the foreseeable future. I would eventually get to stop and, like most people back then, have a beer. The two became linked.

This respondent conditioning is one reason I resisted installing the latest iteration on launch day, as is my wont. Playing gets me all riled up, and then I want alcohol, an urge I find uncomfortable. I play games to relax, after all. Another reason was that I'd taken part in the Switch beta testing, and wasn't excited by the new format, which was familiar. After 650+ hours of Player Career Mode, I felt done with it. I play on Ultimate, using the Pro camera and

## MATT KILLEEN



**THIS MONTH**  
Yearned for 'Champagne football' without the alcohol.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Hardspace Shipbreaker*

still become Messi in short order. But here I was, like the proverbial alcoholic who thought he could have just one glass, pressing A to start.

## MORE VIOLENT

Some work has definitely happened under the hood. For the career-minded, players now have agents who are continually working on your next transfer, although only time will tell if this works in the long term. Just being able to choose specific targets is a great innovation.

**AFTER 650+ HOURS OF  
PLAYER CAREER MODE,  
I FELT DONE WITH IT**

Likewise, linking perks to personality finally makes all that stuff you can buy make sense. Then there's the renewed level of challenge to the game that doesn't just come across as outrageous CPU cheating.

Yet, Hypermotion has never looked right to me, reminiscent of the way that *The Hobbit* movies made everything seem less believable. Also, lots of old gripes are back. The internationals are borked again – you're playing at Wembley, but sit in the Forest Green Rovers dressing room – and the game seems to have forgotten about substitutions altogether. My League 2 teenager got an unlikely England call up and, instead of getting a few minutes at the end of the game, was immediately starting. And you don't get to be captain any more – a wonderful update in the dying days of *FIFA 23* that had me starting a new player from scratch just to be the one picking up trophies. The fact is, I've played the game to death, and I'm not really enjoying it. Thus, the cold new pint becomes backwash at the bottom of the glass. ■





# DIABLO IV

Blizzard's action RPG hits its stride in Season 2. *By Tyler Colp*

**M**y Sorceress has one of the rarest items in *Diablo IV*. Ahavarion, Spear of Lycander, is an 'Uber' Unique that drops off one of the hardest endgame boss fights. It does absurdly high damage and periodically transforms my character into a god.

The spear isn't technically good for my build, which funnels all my power into balls of lightning that orbit my character. But when the spear's unique effect triggers and I become a pulsing ball of destructive energy, I don't need a build. Enemies explode no matter what gear I have on. It feels like breaking the game – and in some ways it is – but it isn't out of place in *Diablo IV*, an action RPG that spent the last six months learning how to celebrate what it's like to be overpowered.

With Season 2, the Season of Blood, *Diablo IV* has finally stabilised. The launch of the game was grindy and directionless and now it's only a little grindy – it's an ARPG after all – and gives you plenty of things to do that are more than worth your time.

Here's how Blizzard turned the game around in four months: around two weeks before Season 2's October launch, Blizzard laid out its plan to

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
June 6, 2023

**DEVELOPER**  
Blizzard

**PUBLISHER**  
Activision Blizzard

**LINK**  
[diablo4.blizzard.com](https://diablo4.blizzard.com)

reshape *Diablo IV*. Through a whopping 40% increase to XP gains and streamlined dungeons, Blizzard effectively chopped the time it took to reach the endgame in half. Loot drops were bountiful and rare Unique items were nearly guaranteed to drop off of specific bosses. Even your horse could get around the open world faster.

The Season of Blood is the reason I've played more *Diablo IV* in the last few months than I did when it launched. Every activity available to you at almost any level will net you loads of XP and resources. Blood Harvest events are active every hour in the open world and they're stuffed with monsters that drop loads of loot and fulfil Grim Favor objectives for millions of gold. Every trip is a shopping spree and you can participate minutes after making a new character.

Vampiric powers are the core of the Season. These powerful abilities are unlocked by spending time collecting Potent Blood in Blood Harvests. You can equip five at a time

and easily swap them around. Almost everyone is running around periodically turning into bats with Metamorphosis, a Vampiric Power that makes it so when you evade your way through enemies, they become vulnerable and are easier to kill. If you have Ravenous equipped, it'll frequently boost your attack speed, which is particularly useful on my Ball Lightning sorceress who casts orbs of lightning that attack for 200% of my current attack speed. When Ravenous' buff pops, I'm a hot knife in a world of butter.

## SUBOPTIMAL ITEM DROPS

Everything in Season 2 invites you to get your hands dirty and play with



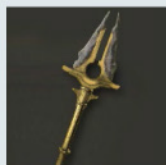
## ENEMIES EXPLODE NO MATTER WHAT GEAR I HAVE ON

the malleability of *Diablo IV*'s classes. You have the resources to find and perfect variants to popular builds that fit your playstyle. Suboptimal item drops can be worked around. My Ball Lightning sorcerer build, for example, uses the class' enchantment slot for Teleport so I can speed through dungeons faster than anything else in the game. Necromancers who are tired of being shackled to their bodies (same) can run a build where they're almost permanently an invulnerable cloud of blood-red mist. Every class has ways to crush the game, and it's now so much more expressive than it was at launch.

The power level has highlighted the problems with *Diablo IV*'s endgame, though, which have persisted since launch. Once you reach level 70 or so, finding upgrades for your specific build is a pain. You'll drop a world boss and pick up an amulet that has two of four stats you need, but because you can only reroll one of them, it's effectively trash. Blizzard has admitted that there are far too many stats that aren't useful and has plans to change that in Season 4. But Season 2 brings an incredibly welcome shift in the game. *Diablo IV* finally feels like a *Diablo* game where you're not constantly running uphill to feel powerful. The future of Sanctuary may continue to be grim, but the future of playing *Diablo IV* is bright. ■

## LOOT LOVER

*The items I can't live without*



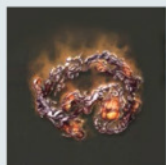
### AHAVARION, SPEAR OF LYCANDER

This spear gives me random shrine buffs like invulnerability and 100% critical strike chance.



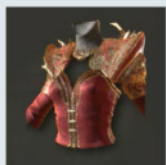
### HARLEQUIN CREST

A reference to the same item in *Diablo II*, the Shako gives me free ranks to spells for good amounts of damage.



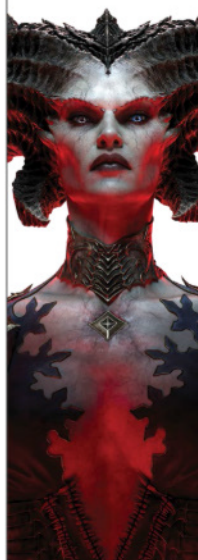
### TAL RASHA'S IRIDESCENT LOOP

A Sorcerer-only ring that rewards me with a massive damage boost for using spells of multiple elements.



### RAIMENT OF THE INFINITE

A chest piece that stuns enemies whenever I teleport into them, crucial for survivability as a glass cannon.





Sorcerers are thriving this Season with the best build in the game.



**FAR LEFT:** Necromancers continue to be one of *Diablo IV*'s best classes.

**BELOW:** Vampiric powers are a huge boost to any build with unique buffs.







# MYHOUSE.WAD

This Doom II mod is the game of the year. *By Wes Fenlon*

**I** was just young and naïve enough when The Blair Witch Project came out to be suckered in by the premise that it was real – that someone had found this real-life footage after the fact, or that it was just a movie but one based on real events. Even now when you Google it, the first ‘people also ask’ result is: was Blair Witch based on a true story?

After 20 years of horror movies aping that gimmick, the Google doc that accompanies *Doom II* mod *MyHouse.wad* doesn’t really have a chance of tricking anyone into thinking it’s a true story about a modder trying to finish their dead friend’s project and slowly descending into madness. But it doesn’t have to.

*Myhouse* is freaky enough all on its own that it keeps me on edge for

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
May 5, 1994

**DEVELOPER**  
id Software

**PUBLISHER**  
GT Interactive

**LINK**  
[shorturl.at/abfsv](http://shorturl.at/abfsv)

hours, shifting under my feet so seamlessly that I still ended up questioning what was real by the time I ‘finished’ it – at which point I’d actually only seen a fraction of what this endlessly messed up mod was waiting to spring on me.

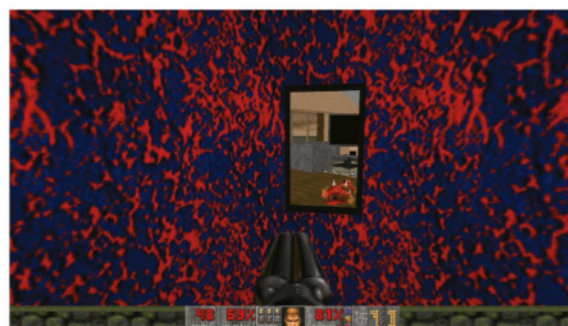
## DOOM’S ROOMS

The journal that accompanies *Myhouse* is one of many meta layers to its story, hiding several seemingly innocent details that tie into the artefacts you’ll find scattered throughout the house as reality starts to fracture around you. “I continue having these vivid, cryptic dreams, and they keep feeling more



**ABOVE:** This mod takes you places you’d never expect.

**BELOW:** The house keeps changing in unusual ways.





## A WAD OF MODS

### Our other favourite Doom mods



**BATMAN: ROGUE CITY**  
A total conversion that turns Mars into Gotham and Doomguy into The Bat.



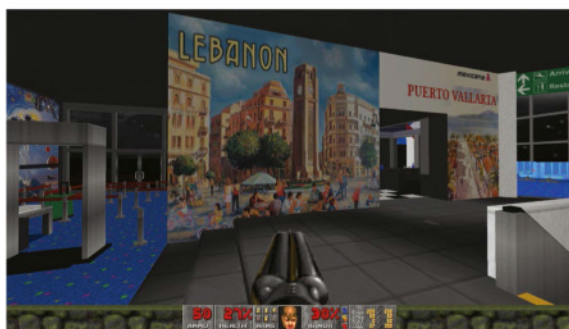
**KING OF THE HILL**  
God-dang it, Bobby. The demons are after our propane and propane accessories!



**WOLFENSTEIN: BLADE OF AGONY**  
A massive mod that serves as a follow up to *Wolfenstein 3D*.

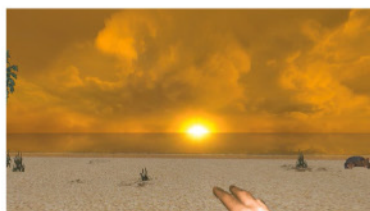


**XIM'S STAR WARS DOOM**  
Star Wars blasters, lightsabers, and Force powers all modded into *Doom*.



**ABOVE:** Unsettling sights around every turn.

**RIGHT:** Somehow this sunset isn't all that relaxing.



personal and unsettling,” the journal reads. “I was dreaming about taking a nice hot bath. I felt myself sinking deeper and deeper into the warm water until I couldn’t breathe. I tried to scream, but no sound escaped my lips. I was drowning in my own bathtub.”

My favourite bit of it is how it plays with the form of modern *Doom* modding, hinting at the difference between the 3.5MB *Myhouse.wad* and 65MB *Myhouse.pk3*, “I tried to delete *myhouse.pk3* but I keep getting a ‘file in use’ error. I don’t think the map will let me. I’m going to post it on Doomworld tonight, but I don’t want anyone playing anything other than the original vanilla release – whatever this map is doing to me, I can’t let it do the same to others.”

In other words: map’s haunted. Seriously, this house isn’t just haunted. It’s ‘The Scooby Gang would bail after 30 minutes’ haunted. It’s ‘I reflexively blurted out the word NO at my monitor at 10pm’ haunted.

It starts small, playing tricks on you that briefly make you question your own memory. I shotgunned my way through the house’s oddly arranged bedrooms, cleared out the den downstairs, and then headed out into the yard for a power-up that taunted me through a window. Outside I peered through the windows befuddled: the enemies were alive again. And that power-up was gone. So I went inside to do it all over and... wait a second. That hallway wasn’t shaped like that before, was it? No, that door’s definitely new – but the angles of the house are so bizarre, it’s easy to think you just didn’t see it the first time through.

### ROOM FOR DOOM

When I found the final key to make my way to the exit, a blank wall was sitting where the front door used to be. There was no way out, just a way to go further in, which is when *Myhouse.pk3* really began.

Or maybe it began the moment I opened a door and discovered a stark black-and-white modern room had appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the cosy wood-panelled house like an invasive species. Or maybe it began after I did find my way to the exit and *GZDoom* dutifully booted up *Doom II*’s

second episode, *Underhalls*. The level offered the relief of a few minutes of straightforward shooting... but it dumped me back into *Myhouse* as soon as I finished it. It took me dying partway through one of a seemingly impossible number of layers to fully grasp how wildly inventive this mod is.

### GHOST STORIES

A few videogames have successfully played with meta storytelling and breaking the fourth wall as effectively as *Myhouse*, like *Undertale* or *The Beginner’s Guide*. But I think there’s a distinct difference here – in those games, you can feel the author reaching through the screen, speaking directly to you, the player. They surprise you and subvert your expectations by acknowledging that



### IT PLAYS WITH THE FORM OF MODERN DOOM MODDING

this is a game, and the game knows it’s a game, and the person behind the game has thoughts about how you’re playing it. *Myhouse* doesn’t care about any of that. It just wants to feel unknowable.

The best found-footage movie can make you suspend your disbelief, but a found wad – which might be a genre of just this one game? – can actually be cursed. It weaponises how you expect a game to behave against you, unfurling into a mystery that could easily keep you occupied for several hours. What makes *Myhouse* really great is that there’s thought and meaning behind all of it, the significance of its jarring liminal spaces tying back to that simple Google doc. Nothing here is just wacky randomness, but in the moment it does still feel disorienting and completely unpredictable.

*Doom* is 30 years old, and yet someone still used it as the vessel to build one of the smartest, most intricate games of the year. What a legacy! Play it once without looking up where to go or what to do – just explore. When you think you’ve seen what there is to see, look up a guide and figure out just how much more this house is hiding. ■





## GET STARTED IN

## PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

Uncover the ancient secrets of Mount Qaf. *By Sean Martin*

## NEED TO KNOW

**DIFFICULTY**  
Normal

**TIME**  
Ten hours

## VITAL LINK

Sidequests:  
[pcgamer.com/  
prince-of-persia-the-  
lost-crown-sidequest-  
locations](http://pcgamer.com/prince-of-persia-the-lost-crown-sidequest-locations)



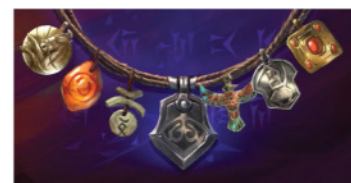
## MAPPED OUT

**1** Shortly after you venture into the ruined citadel, you'll encounter Fariba; a mysterious young girl who knows every nook and cranny of Mount Qaf. As you discover new areas, you'll be able to buy maps from Fariba, provided you can track her down.



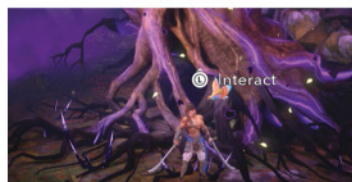
## HINT HINT

**2** Fariba also provides handy tips if you're stuck with the main story, provided you're willing to part with a few of your hard-earned Time Crystals, that is. If you're ever stumped as to the next step, talk to Fariba in The Haven just to the right of the Magi's Emporium.



## AMULETS

**3** For fans of Metroidvanias, *The Lost Crown's* Amulet system will be very familiar. Equipping these trinkets you find or buy throughout Mount Qaf grants effects like extra health, ability damage, or resistance. You can increase the number you can equip too.



## GIVE ME SOMA

**4** One of the best ways to stay alive in the citadel ruins is to boost your health bar, and for that you'll need Soma Tree Petals or Flowers. While you can find these in chests or hidden around the map, the best way to get them is to complete quests.



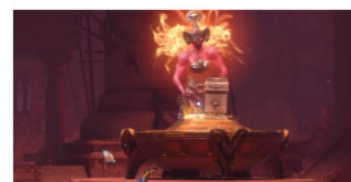
## HELPING HAND

**5** Besides Soma Tree Flowers, quests are a great source of new Amulets, too. The first quest-givers you're likely to encounter are Nojan in the Lower City and the soldier in the Hyrcanian Forest, but there are plenty of others.



## ATHRA SURGES

**6** Unlike your main Simurgh powers, you can activate these combat abilities to perform powerful attacks or even heal yourself. Attacking enemies will charge your Athra, but you can also equip Amulets to speed the process.

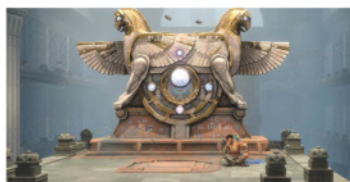


## DAMASCUS INGOTS

**7** Buffing your damage will also make combat easier; it's hard for enemies to kill you when they're dead. After you return from the Hyrcanian Forest, you can enter Kaheva's Forge in The Haven and upgrade your weapons with Azure Damascus Ingots you've found.

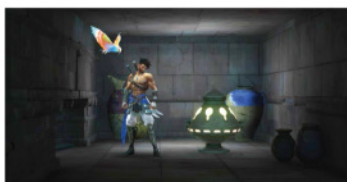


## FIGHTING TIME *Turn Sargon into a monster-slaying machine*



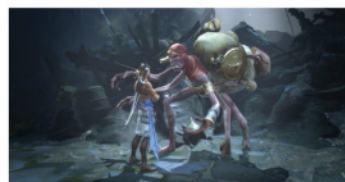
### HOMA STATUES

**8** Another tool you can unlock after returning from the forest is fast travel. You might have spied the fast travel icon in The Haven, but you can't access this until you repair your first Homa Statue in the Scholars' Area, after you use Dash of the Simurgh.



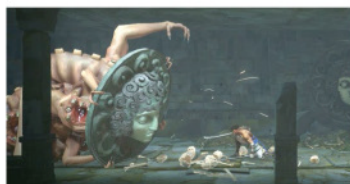
### COARSE AND ROUGH

**9** You've likely found the Spirited-Sand fresco; a giant mural with a glowing jar of sand in front of it that you can release by whacking it with your sword. As you track down the other 29 Spirited-Sand Jars throughout the map, make sure to return to claim the rewards.



### XERXES

**10** Wondering what to do with those strange Xerxes coins you've found? You can't spend this special currency until chapter three when you meet the Scrapper in The Depths. This merchant offers some special cursed Amulets, but only takes payment in Xerxes.



### MASKED MONSTERS

**11** While travelling through The Depths, you're sure to encounter giant stone-masked monsters that block corridors. You can't get past these until you acquire the Shadows of the Simurgh ability, which lets you leave an echo of yourself and warp behind the monsters.



### POTION MASTER

**12** One last tip: upgrade your healing potion. While you do have the Baham's Breath Athra Surge to regain health, *The Lost Crown* is pretty stingy with its healing. You can buy upgrades to your health flask from the Magi Emporium.





# INFILTRATING A PIRATE FACTION IN STARFIELD

## PART 2

Jett Johnson returns,  
and this time he's  
going undercover

By Matt Poskitt





**O**n the outer reaches of the planet Nesoi in the Olympus star system, a space station drifts deserted above the murky green surface. What riches lie within? Could it have already been ransacked? Or how about a priceless gem ready to be auctioned off on the black market? At the very least, there might be some leftover liquor to help quell this nightmare of sobriety that has quickly crept up in the last few hours. That's right, Jett Johnson is back.

Since we last caught up with our hotheaded hero, Jett became embroiled in a dispute between colonisers and a corporation where, for the first time in a long while, money took a back seat. Finding a planet at the galaxy's edge to sip banana daiquiris in solitude until the sun makes him look like he's just left a mudbath is still very much the end goal, but something has changed since he decided to pay for those colonisers to get a new Grav Drive to secure safety instead of blasting them to smithereens. Worst of all, that moment of generosity has put a big dent in his savings for paradise. Jett needs credits, and he needs them now.

This is where we pick up, circling the abandoned Almagest space station having heard rumours of a big score. No lights. No sign of life. Just darkness, as the Kapowski docks into what certainly won't be a straightforward grab-and-go. Downing the remainder of his Scotch, tightening his stretched belt (which wasn't so tight-fitting at one time), Jett grabs a pistol and makes his way to the airlock.

### JACKPOT

Upon entering, two things become abundantly clear: zero-gravity is in full effect, meaning floating through the regal corridors is the only option, and the Almagest is not just any old space station but at one time was a luxurious casino for the super-rich. You would think that gambling would appeal to Jett. The man likes a drink, and typically the two sins go hand-in-hand. It's actually the opposite. The idea of working like a dog only to risk it at a game of chance infuriates him, pulling forth a memory of shame – potentially a parent who lost thousands, or a

lover's addiction that ruined a past relationship. It's a thought that quickly dissipates, as a red laser sight dots onto his forehead.

It's easy to mistake Jett's belly for a sign of sluggishness. If that were true, there's no doubt that the Grim Reaper would have called there and then. Thankfully, those well-worn reflexes are still firmly embedded, prompting a salmon-like leap out of harm's way. "Breathe, Johnson. Breathe," he tells himself, before firing the pistol with pinpoint precision to take out the Spacer who had the misfortune of coming across one of the best gunslingers in the Settled Systems this mighty fine day.

## IT'S A THOUGHT THAT QUICKLY DISSIPATES, AS A RED LASER SIGHT DOTS HIS FOREHEAD

Half a dozen or so further scavengers trying to claim the remnants of this forgotten casino – which comes off as more Atlantic City than its intended aspiration of being a Las Vegas-lookalike – are dispatched in quick succession. Their accuracy, or lack thereof, makes it obvious that whoever the group were, they were new to the game. This doesn't faze our protagonist, who is rather focused on cracking open the safes and hacking the computer mainframe for all the cash those fat cats left behind in their heyday.

A measly 3,700 credits is a disappointing return considering the potential. Everything else onboard looks pretty worthless, so grabbing something in the hope of getting close to 5,000 is the only way to make this trip not seem futile. The one bonus is a decent quantity of Aurora, an illegal hallucinogenic drug made from a specialist fish that is banned in pretty much every destination from Abetti to Zamka. One wild night where Jett ended up hijacking a luxury space cruise liner after watching Titanic 3000: The Curse of Jack Dawson means he should know better, but still, that could be a sizeable chunk of credits if the right buyer is found. My wish to see Jett pushed into new unexpected scenarios coupled with the notion that I think the guy needs a big win convinces me to grab it. What's the worst that could happen, right?

### HARD TIME

Phobos, one of the two moons of Mars located in the Sol system. A large warship blankets the skies, in my mind The Imperial March from Star Wars plays. This is the UC Vigilance, the flagship of the UC Navy and the command centre of operations for the UC System Defense force.

On top of this, it is now home to Jett Johnson who, in a panicked state, began to ingest every trace of Aurora seconds before being boarded by the interstellar army, or so I imagine. He questions whether the government is out to get him. In

### THE RULES

1. Take no prisoners: always opt for the 'Attack' option when offered.

2. Sarcasm at its finest: choose the most sarcastic or rude dialogue at all times.

3. Avoid Constellation missions and instead help out anyone who needs it... for a price.



Even from the back, Jett Johnson's hair is a thing of beauty.



reality, the sour fish aroma and the licking of a general's earlobe were his undoing. "Not my finest hour," he thinks, waiting in a cell for what is likely to be a severe sentence for an amateur crime. After all, his record isn't exactly Florence Nightingale.

Commander Kibwe Ikande enters the frame, initially reading through the mining expedition on Vectera, the brief encounter with Constellation (I wonder if Barrett's still waiting) and lastly the diplomat role played for the ECS Constant, which is what led to this mess in the first place. Jett smiles cheekily, only able to muster up a lame comeback, "I bet my shoe size isn't in your records". The effect of Aurora must still be lingering, he's usually far better at quips than that.

Ikande gets to the point, and it involves the Crimson Fleet pirate faction. "If we can get someone on the inside, we'd have a shot at finding a loose thread we can pull to bring it all down." Jett's first response suggests they should just "give up" – that thought does not amuse the Commander. The ultimatum: work for SysDef to take down the Crimson Fleet, or end up in jail with a hefty fine, which is the last thing Jett needs. "Depending on how well you do your job, we'll even kick in a few extra credits," Ikande adds. Say no more!

### TIM COOK'S GARAGE

We meet outside of cuffs to go through the first mission, aptly titled Undercover. The room is enormous, filled with more computers than Tim Cook's garage. Soldiers huddle around a futuristic workbench plotting their next move. A lone Ikande stands in front of three wall-encompassing screens waiting to speak, "This is the Operations Center of the UC Vigilance, SysDef's nerve centre dedicated to the destruction of the Crimson Fleet," he explains. What blindsides me next is the dialogue option, "And this is me shooting my way off this prison ship!"

Sticking to the three rules I set, I begrudgingly make for the exit while firing at the commander alongside his many underlings. On its own, it's a difficult ask considering all of these (now) enemies are between 20 to 40 levels above my ranking. What makes this near impossible are the two automatic turrets that descend out of the ceiling behind Ikande, like a devil and angel on both

BELOW: Do you think he's overcompensating?



## TEACH A MAN TO FISH, AND HE'LL GET HIGH FOR A LIFETIME

Everything you need to know about Aurora



shoulders – except both are devils, and both have an unlimited supply of ammunition. Ol' Jett's seen some tough battles; gotten himself out of a few by the skin of his oddly perfect teeth. This is asking a lot, though.

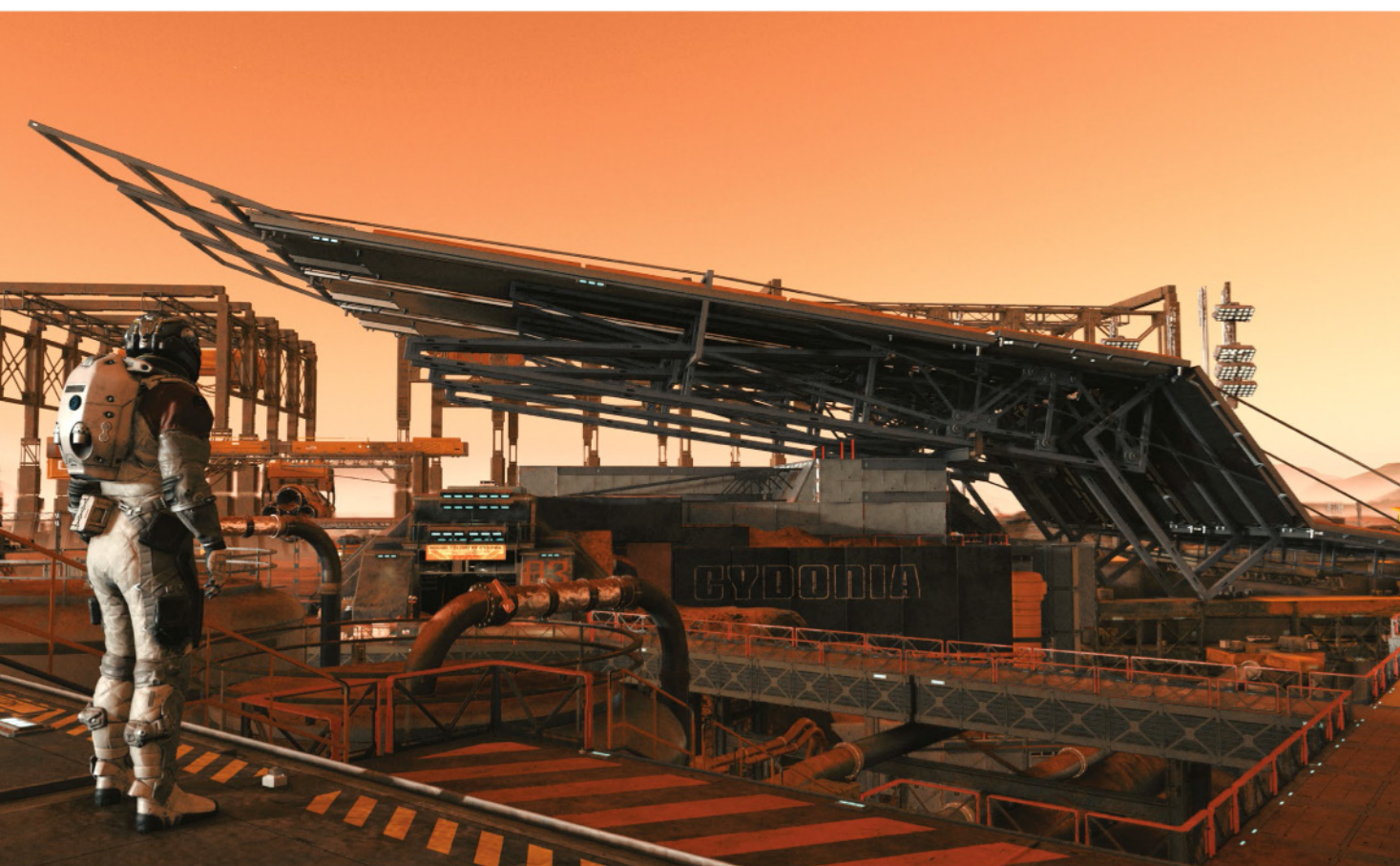
### LIVE, DIE, REPEAT

I die. I die again. I die a third time. On the seventh attempt, I make it to the door only to be shot as I press the elevator button. On the 12th attempt, I hide under a staircase trying to pick off every soldier one by one until I run out of bullets. It's beginning to seem futile. As I close in on the 17th attempt, I question whether this is worth the effort. I'm about to infiltrate a pirate organisation in a hidden *Starfield* mission that Bethesda has gone to great lengths to think up. Adventure will surely ensue. Jett's also one for breaking the rules (we saw how he ingeniously sidestepped blowing up a survival crew in part one), so on my 19th restart, I holster my weapon and leave the UC Vigilance in search of the Crimson Fleet.

After a few bribes within the Cydonia colony on the planet Mars, I'm directed to Europa in the Sol system to meet Naeva Mora, second in command of the Crimson Fleet. Naturally a bit apprehensive about me joining, I'm tasked with finding a traitor named Austin Rake – who sounds more like a Bosch mascot than a pirate – on a medical supply ship called the Ragana. It's then close to one of the seven moons of Saturn that Jett gets the chance to unleash the full fury of the Kapowski, selecting the fourth dialogue option to initiate an all-out attack in space. Rake might have picked up skills at manoeuvring, but Jett's more than a match, decimating the ship in 30 seconds flat.

It's hard to imagine the UC Navy being pleased about this outcome (what do they expect from a man who tried to lick one of their





## IT QUICKLY BECOMES APPARENT THAT MORA IS INFATUATED WITH JETT

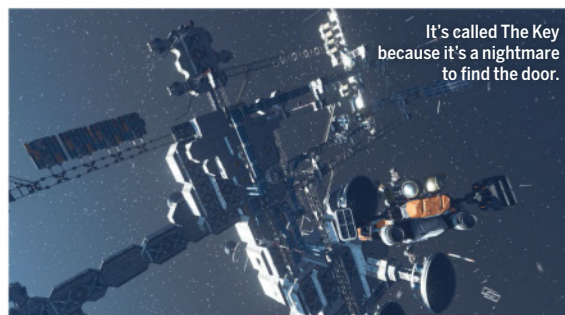
earlobes on first meeting) but it suffices for Mora, who appreciates the lack of witnesses. A moment of good fortune then offers up the chance to save the pirate deputy from Ecliptic mercenaries upon our return to Europa. Jett's going to avoid mentioning the fact that those mercenaries were out for his blood for shooting up a karaoke bar because there was no Avril Lavigne on the jukebox. It's fair to say his music preferences are... complicated. The good news is that Mora is satisfied, "You wanted into the Crimson Fleet, well... you're in." It's a big step, and one that our leading man jumps at – now heading to their headquarters, The Key.

Orbiting the planet Suvorov, The Key is a humongous piece of machinery that rivals that of Commander

Ikande's fleet. It has an unusual layout, with so many structures and scaffolding that you'd be forgiven for thinking the new series of Gladiators was filmed here. One pirate shoots another in the entrance hall as Mora provides a welcome tour. It's nothing Jett hasn't seen before, but he needs to have his wits about him.

It quickly becomes apparent that Mora is infatuated with Jett; the longing stares, the way she's sticking her neck out so he can join as well as the schoolgirl insults to hide her emotion. "Oh yeah, still got it," Jett whispers under his breath, briefly reminded of the obsessive Lin and the gorgeous Heller from Vectera. She touches her nose frequently, trying to not get lost in his eyes which he believes resemble an ocean, whereas they're more like a backyard pool that's had one too many leaves fall in it. Maybe it's his rugged good looks or the near-death experience they both survived. Or maybe it's that Jett hasn't showered since consuming Aurora all those hours ago. No time to address that disconcerting thought, it's time to meet the leader of the Crimson Fleet. ■

**ABOVE:** Cydonia. You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.





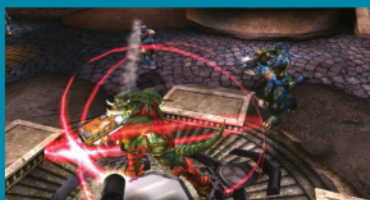


WHY I LOVE

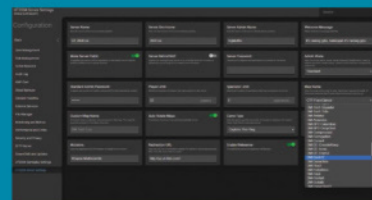
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

# RUNNING MY OWN RETRO GAME SERVER

Server control panel AMP put my favourite old shooters back into play. *By Wes Fenlon*



**LEFT:** *Unreal Tournament 2004* features a frankly ridiculous variety of maps and modes.





**B**y god, do I love *Unreal Tournament 2004*. They don't make them like this any more. But it's not just the name. It's the attitude, like a low bitrate voice saying "holy shit" when you max out the graphics settings. It's the way I can die, respawn and instagib a bot in the space of a single breath.

Months ago I found myself pining for *UT2004*'s manic pace and the occasional afternoon instagib sessions we'd have at the office when I first joined PC Gamer. But after a couple afternoons poking around dead message boards trying to find the right files and instructions to run a dedicated server, I gave up. The information was just too fractured, and my Linux command line skills were too poor. Even if I'd gotten a server running, I wouldn't have been able to configure it to my liking.

### SERVES ME RIGHT

Over the Christmas break at the end of 2023 I decided to give it another shot, and that's when I discovered AMP, aka the Application Management Panel (is there some law that declares the more useful a piece of community-driven software is, the drier its name has to be?). AMP is that good shit. It's a web panel that provides an easy-to-use mouse interface for running servers for dozens of games, from old shooters to *Minecraft* to recent hits like *Sons of the Forest*. Installing the server module for any game just takes a click, and all of the settings for that server live in a compact configuration menu. You can backup configs,

### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
March 16, 2004

**DEVELOPER**  
Epic Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Epic Games

**LINK**  
[epicgames.com](http://epicgames.com)

## UNRETIRED

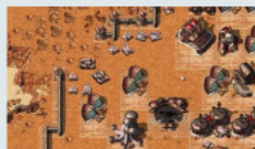
AMP server picks for the 35+ crowd



**COUNTER-STRIKE: CONDITION ZERO**  
It's *Counter-Strike*, but with a campaign!



**HALF-LIFE DEATHMATCH: SOURCE**  
Back when Valve was in its goofy era and you could fry the G-Man.



**OPENRA - DUNE 2000**  
A *Command & Conquer* reskin, with John Rhys-Davies hamming it up in the FMVs.



**COD 4: MODERN WARFARE**  
Not to be confused with *MW Remastered*. Claymore your way to that helicopter killstreak.

update the software with a couple clicks, edit ports and check logs all without using a command line.

AMP has the vibe of an open-source platform, but it's actually paid software. I happily slapped down my \$5, reckoning that the developers charging for AMP would likely mean it had a friendlier install process than

## THE INFORMATION WAS JUST TOO FRACTURED, AND MY LINUX SKILLS WERE TOO POOR

a lot of open-source software, and would be actively supported for the foreseeable future.

With my first stab at *Unreal*, I'd struggled to figure out what to type into an .ini file to cycle through random maps or fill empty slots with bots. In my AMP instance, though, every setting is laid out in its own

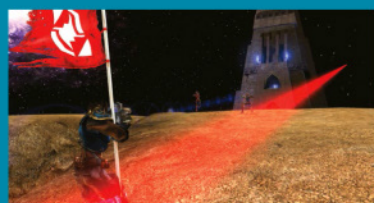
little box, with an explanation of what it does painstakingly written out below by a community developer. Essentially, AMP adapts all those crusty text file-based server configs into a consistent graphical interface, making it way easier to run not just a single game server, but to know where to look for similar settings across servers. I immediately perused the list for shooters beyond *UT2004* and spun up servers for *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* and *Sven Co-op*.

### COSY CODE

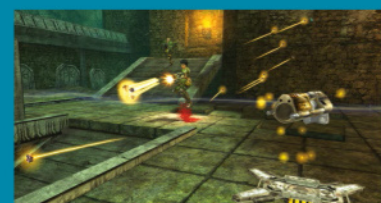
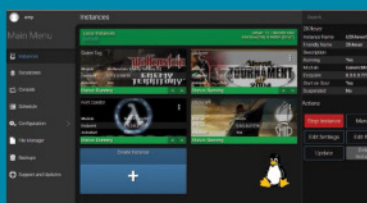
There's just something so comforting about having these old shooters easily at hand, knowing that I could probably download one, boot it and start a match in the time it takes a modern game to compile shaders. What I think I'm really chasing is a multiplayer experience utterly stripped of battle passes, timed seasonal events, currencies, or different coloured pants.

Tweaking a server setup for an older shooter serves as a blatant reminder of what we've given up for the sake of graphical fidelity and speedy matchmaking, too. AMP's *Unreal Tournament 2004* module comes preconfigured with 126 maps for 11 different modes. I can type in a mutator to enable instagib or change up the gravity, completely altering the experience. Maybe in another 20 years I'll get sick of this bounty of official maps and go perusing the quintillion custom maps and modes still surviving on *Unreal* fan sites, ready to extend this kitchen sink of a shooter into infinity.

I know ultimately these servers won't get a ton of use – I don't expect to pull all my friends and colleagues away from the new and shiny for more than a novelty match here or there... then again, if they don't read this, they'll have no idea how easy it all was to set up, and I can guilt them into playing 20-year-old shooters with me every week. ■



**RIGHT:** Soooo much easier than the command line.







REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Attempts to bring the fiction  
of the films it is based on to life





# TERMINATOR: RESISTANCE

Revisiting Teyon's game after RoboCop: Rogue City. *By Rick Lane*

**I** ditched *Terminator: Resistance* soon after starting it back in 2019, writing it off as yet another dismal movie tie-in from Polish developer Teyon, creator of 2014's lambasted *Rambo: The Video Game*. But after enjoying *RoboCop: Rogue City* late last year, I wondered whether I'd been too quick to dismiss Teyon's earlier work. While no masterpiece, *Rogue City* is a faithful and thoughtful adaptation of Verhoeven's film, one that does a good job of embodying you in Alex Murphy's metal exoskeleton. And although *Resistance* was fairly well panned by critics at the time, it has garnered a 'Very Positive' rating on Steam in the years since release.

Hence, *Terminator: Resistance* seemed ripe for reappraisal. And

having now returned to its depiction of *Terminator's* blighted future, it is a better game than I gave it initial credit for, but nowhere near as much as its Steam reviewers would have you believe. Like *RoboCop*, it earnestly attempts to bring the fiction of the films it is based on to life. But it is far less successful, mostly demonstrating how far Teyon has come in the last four years.

As I mentioned, *Terminator: Resistance* focuses on the aftermath of the nuclear holocaust caused by Skynet on August 29, 1997, when the remnants of humanity are locked in a struggle against the machines. You play as Jacob Rivers, a private in the Resistance who has been specifically targeted by Skynet for reasons unknown.

On the face of it, this is a smart choice of setting for a *Terminator* game. Post-apocalyptic Los Angeles

**TOP:** *Resistance* is at its best when it pops off, though this is sadly rare.

was only ever glimpsed in the first two movies, and the attempts to explore it further in the films have been thoroughly half-baked. Cameron's vision is striking and distinctive in a way that no *Terminator* film since has replicated, and if you recreate it in a videogame, you'd be well on the way to a winner.

In this regard, the opening minutes of *Resistance* show promise. The game kicks off with Rivers in hard retreat from the Californian town of Pasadena, where his division had been wiped out by the Annihilation Line, Skynet's rolling frontline of Terminators directed to crush the Resistance. It sees you crawling through the wreckage of what was once idyllic southern California, evading the laser-red eyes of skeletal T-800s. Teyon is clearly keen to evoke the chaos and desperation shown in the opening minutes of both *Terminator* films. *Resistance* has the same indigo tinge to the night, the same devastated

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
November 14, 2019

**DEVELOPER**  
Teyon

**PUBLISHER**  
Reef Entertainment

**LINK**  
teyon.com





The T-800s aren't Stormtroopers. Prepare to get shot. Frequently.

landscapes illuminated by fires. It even directly mimics the first proper scene in the film, a T-800's foot crashing down onto a human skull.

Yet where Cameron conveys the horror of these scenes wordlessly, letting the imagery do all the talking, *Resistance's* intro is stuffed with dialogue. And it is rotten. The first characters Jacob meets in the game are the young scavenger Jennifer and her juvenile brother Patrick, who set the low standard for *Resistance's* writing and acting. Jennifer's VO isn't the worst, but her bug-eyed stare makes it hard to take anything she says seriously. Patrick, meanwhile, is possibly the least-convincing child ever depicted in a videogame, his gruff, monotone voice very obviously emerging from an adult's throat.

### POOR CHARACTERISATION

Normally, poor characterisation wouldn't be a huge problem in a shooter, but *Resistance* leans hard into narrative storytelling. Every mission is bookended with scenes where you must talk to fellow soldiers and survivors, and every character is hard work, whether it's old Judgement Day survivor Ryan prattling on about the past, or your commander Baron tiresomely

demonstrating what a hardass she is. The game also tells you that your narrative decisions matter, and your relationships with characters are affected by these choices, which means you need to listen to their dull life stories if you want to see the best ending the game has to offer.

*Resistance* also takes a long time to get going. Instead of being a straightforward linear shooter, many

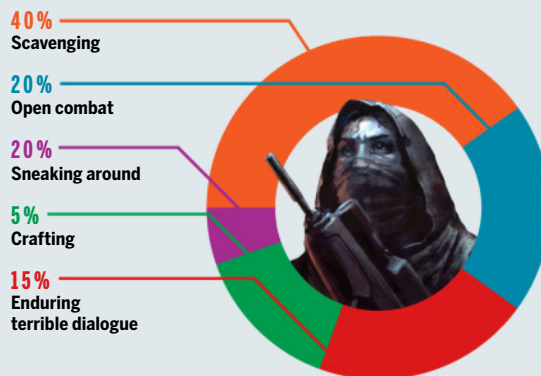
of its levels are semi-open affairs that blend stealth and survival systems with the basic shooting. You're encouraged to scavenge resources from dilapidated stores and crumbling apartment blocks, while maps are designed to let you choose between sneaking around enemy patrols and engaging in combat.

The intent is clearly to emphasise your underdog status, forced to eke out your existence off scavenged resources, and utilise guerrilla tactics against the machines. Unfortunately, neither of these activities are especially interesting. Resources are so abundant that scavenging quickly descends into walking into buildings and mindlessly hoovering up whatever you find. The stealth, meanwhile, is undermined by the fact that the enemies you're sneaking around are just a bit rubbish. The opening level has you fighting floating drones and mechanical spiders that are laughably easy to kill.

Combined with the droning dialogue, *Resistance's* opening hours are stilted, empty and devoid of pacing, nothing like the taut cinematic thrillers it's based on. Things improve a bit once Teyon introduces proper Terminators. One of its best sequences sees you

### LIFE IN THE RESISTANCE

Here's how you'll spend your time in *Terminator: Resistance*



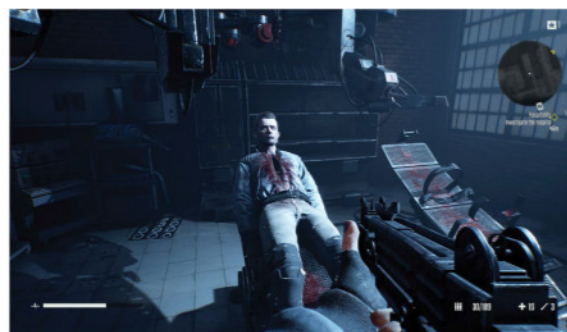
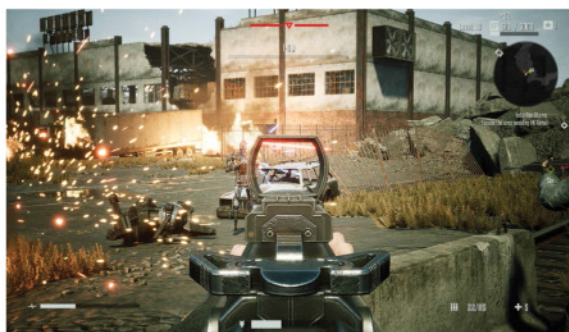




**ABOVE:** STOP STARING AT ME.

**RIGHT:** Darn it, I'm always getting Terminators and cars mixed up!

**FAR RIGHT:** That face looks familiar...



sneaking through an abandoned hospital prowled by T-800s. At this point in the game, your weapons are ineffective against T-800 armour, so if you get spotted, you're dead meat. It's the closest *Resistance* comes to evoking the dread of the first two films, as you press yourself into corners desperately hoping those metal monstrosities don't see you. Shortly after this, though, you unlock your first plasma weapon, and the T-800s become just another enemy in your way.

It's a shame *Terminator: Resistance* doesn't maintain the mystique of the T-800s for longer. But it does mean Teyon can start escalating the action, interspersing its open-ended scouting missions with more linear shooting galleries. When these missions are in full flow, they're pretty fun. One example sees you take on the Annihilation Line in downtown Los Angeles, and it effectively communicates the appalling odds faced by the Resistance. Alongside hordes of T-800 foot-soldiers, you must contend with mech-like T-47s, HK-Aerials strafing you overhead, and huge rocket towers bombarding your position with screaming ordnance.

## YOU MUST CONTEND WITH MECH-LIKE T-47S, HK-AERIALS STRAFING YOU OVERHEAD

### IMPRESSIVE SPECTACLE

Visually, *Resistance* is generally archaic. But one thing Teyon is good at depicting is explosions. Even the smallest enemies go out with a bang, so when there are grenades flying, rockets dropping and T-800s combusting across an entire battlefield, it makes for an impressive spectacle. It also helps obscure the fact that the actual combat is fairly basic. Battling the machines mostly boils down to peeping around a corner and letting off a few shots with your plasma weapon before your enemies shred your health bar. Beyond the odd well-judged grenade throw, there's no real skill or dynamism to the fighting.

There are some fun moments in *Terminator: Resistance*, but they require considerable patience to be enjoyed. This is partly down to a simple lack of quality, but it's also clear that Teyon struggles to find the balance between staying true to its setting and delivering the action

demanding by a shooter. Scavenging for resources amid the rubble is interesting in theory, but tedious in practice. At the same time, gunning down T-800s by the dozen dispels much of their power, which is why Cameron's films only show us the war against the machines for a few minutes apiece. A better approach for a *Terminator* FPS would be to cast the player in the role of Terminator, as their relentless, destructive nature makes them a much better fit for an FPS protagonist. This is essentially what Teyon does for *RoboCop*, and it makes for far more entertaining shooting experience.

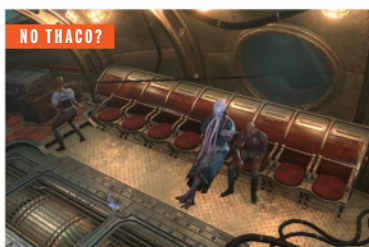
*Terminator: Resistance* isn't some flawed gem. It's just flawed. That said, it isn't entirely without merit. Every time I started to lose my patience with its turgid levels or excruciating dialogue, my character would level up, and the game would play the iconic drum beat from Brad Fiedel's soundtrack. Whenever that happened, it reminded me of how much I like the idea of this game, even if the reality doesn't quite line up with it. This would keep me going long enough to reach the next part of *Terminator: Resistance* that was actually worth playing, and I'm glad I experienced those moments. ■



## TED LITCHFIELD



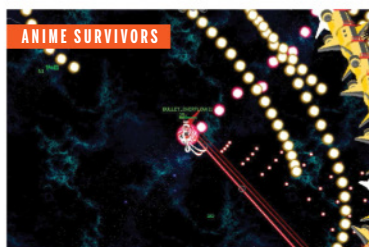
It's a cold, wet time of year so why not while it away with games? There were so many good ones last year, there's bound to be a few you missed.



## BALDUR'S GATE III

[bit.ly/baldursgate3.game](https://bit.ly/baldursgate3.game)

→ Larian's follow-up to the long-dormant *Baldur's Gate* series went a little under the radar in 2023, but its lack of critical and commercial success was just criminal if you ask me. Continued additions like a permadeath mode and new endings make it a great time to jump back in.



## PICAYUNE DREAMS

[bit.ly/4aTEvcG](https://bit.ly/4aTEvcG)

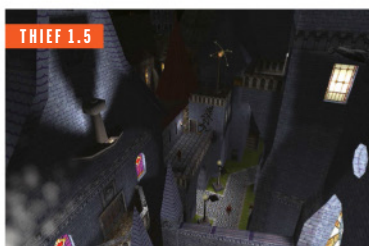
→ There have been a lot of mediocre *Vampire Survivors*-likes, a few good ones, and now: *Picayune Dreams*. I loved the demo for this story-heavy, sci-fi take on a 'bullet heaven' shooter, and have the full game lined up on my Steam Deck for when I finally stop playing *Baldur's Gate III*.



## MYHOUSE.WAD

[doomworld.com](https://doomworld.com)

→ A lot of new stuff on the *Doom* engine tries to bowl you over with graphical or artistic grunt. *Myhouse* instead uses a simple, familiar concept, "I made my house in *Doom*," to convey this enervating tale that just runs roughshod over any '90s nostalgia you have left. It rules.



## THIEF: THE BLACK PARADE

[ttl.com](https://ttl.com)

→ It's a better time to be a *Thief* fan than at any point since the year 2000. Arkane's still doing its thing, *Gloomwood* and *Serpens* offer indie alternatives, and now a talented mod team rooted in the TTLG forums has released a ten-mission campaign that rivals the official series.

# MUST



# PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST  
OF THE BEST  
GAMES YOU CAN  
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

*by Ted Litchfield*



## LUNACID

[store.steampowered.com/app/1745510/Lunacid](https://store.steampowered.com/app/1745510/Lunacid)

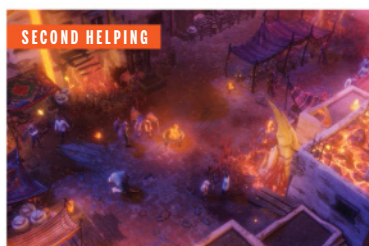
→ I got a good way into this first-person RPG inspired by FromSoftware's PS1 and PS2 classics, but I've been meaning to revisit it on my trusty Steam Deck. Dripping with atmosphere and turn-of-the-millennium polygonal vibes, it nails that sense of mystery.



## SLAYERS X: TERMINAL AFTERMATH: VENGEANCE OF THE SLAYER

[bit.ly/4aRc3IA](https://bit.ly/4aRc3IA)

→ *Slayers X* is a spinoff of *Hypnospace Outlaw*, presenting as the artistic creation of one of that game's more memorable characters, a lovable nu-metal doofus named Zane. The result reminds me most of shooters like *Duke Nukem* or *Blood*.



## PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

[bit.ly/48Fkzsm](https://bit.ly/48Fkzsm)

→ 180 hours of this game buoyed me through getting Covid for the first time, and I've been meaning to revisit it for a while. A classic CRPG romp, it makes for a crunchier second course if your *Baldur's Feast* still left you hungry for more.



## DUSK

[store.steampowered.com/app/519860/DUSK](https://store.steampowered.com/app/519860/DUSK)

→ The game that put publisher New Blood on the map and helped cement the boomer shooter renaissance got a fresh coat of paint. *Dusk HD* cheekily upgrades the game from PS1-era edge to PS2-style chunky smoothness, and the shooting's as great as ever.





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# MEET THE INQUISITOR

Holy Inquisitor of the Church of PC Gaming, **JOBERT RONES**, hunts out console gaming heretics throughout the land by enforcing the faith's key commandments.

## *Malleus Ludus Console Histriones*

(Trans. 'The Hammer of Console Game Players')

- 1 Thou shalt have no other faith before PC gaming
- 2 Thou shalt not suffer a gamer to play on console
- 3 Thou shalt not participate in heretical console wars
- 4 Remember the PC Gaming Show day, to keep it holy
- 5 Honour thy PC gaming father, Gabe Newell
- 6 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven console image
- 7 Thou shalt not covet console gaming hardware
- 8 Thou shalt not steal thy fellow PC gamer's accessories
- 9 Thou shalt read PC Gamer magazine monthly
- 10 carry Steam Deck upon thy person when abroad

...UNTIL **MAR 28**





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